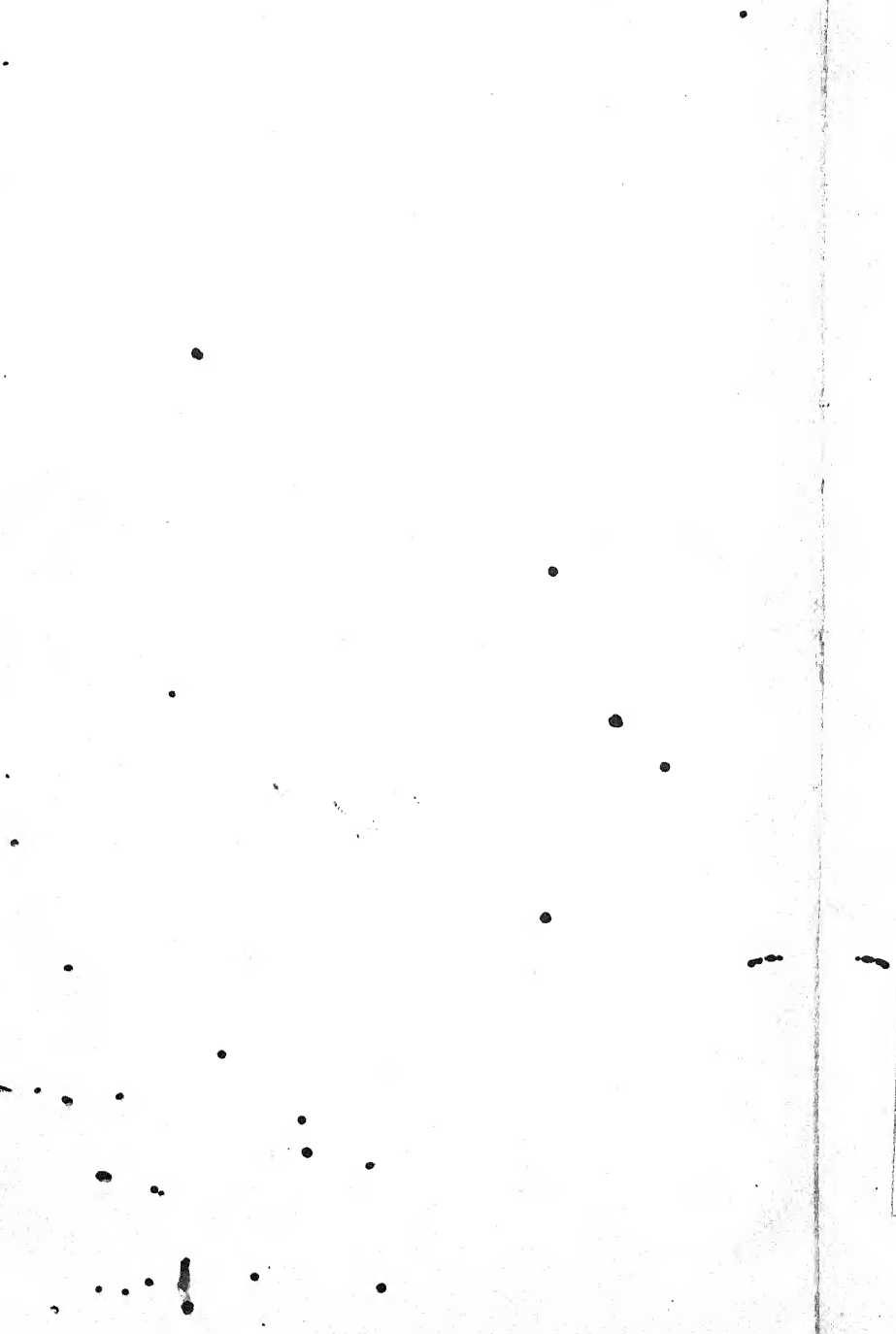


SELECTED  
SHORT STORIES  
OF TODAY



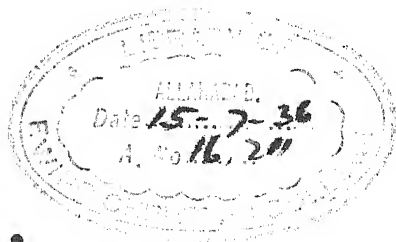


# SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY .

*edited by*

DOROTHY SCARBOROUGH

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH  
• COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



FARRAR & RINEHART

INCORPORATED

*Publishers*

*New York*



COPYRIGHT, 1935, BY DOROTHY SCARBOROUGH  
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
BY QUINN & BODEN COMPANY, INC., RAHWAY, N. J.  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

*To*

MARJORIE RAMSEY

WHOSE GENEROSITY HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR  
VARIOUS GIFTED YOUNG PERSONS TO TAKE MY  
FICTION-WRITING COURSES

*The stories reprinted in this volume are used by permission of and special arrangement with the authors and publishers who control the copyrights. My thanks are due to all who have courteously co-operated with me in this undertaking. I wish to thank especially Mr. Robert Van Gelder of The New York Times, Mr. Vernon Loggins of Columbia University, and Mrs. Dorothy Lampe for suggestions as to selections of stories.*

# Contents

INTRODUCTION	ix
A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS, <i>George Milburn</i>	3
TOBERMORY, <i>Saki (H. H. Munro)</i>	27
THE HOUND, <i>William Faulkner</i>	36
✓CHILD OF GOD, <i>Roark Bradford</i>	51
✓SALESMANSHIP, <i>Mary Ellen Chase</i>	67
JOBS IN THE SKY, <i>Tess Slesinger</i>	75
✓A JEETER WEDDING, <i>Dorothy Thomas</i>	94
RACHEL, <i>Erskine Caldwell</i>	106
✓DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY, <i>Virginia Woolf</i>	116
HOLD 'EM, <i>Dale, Damon Runyon</i>	133
OLD MARTIN, <i>A. E. Coppard</i>	148
SUNSTROKE, <i>Ivan Bunin</i>	165
✓IN EGYPT, <i>Moe Bragin</i>	174
THE CRYSTAL BALL, <i>Charles Caldwell Dobie</i>	189
✓MISS LETITIA'S PROFESSION, <i>Lupton A. Wilkinson</i>	206
✓A TELEPHONE CALL, <i>Dorothy Parker</i>	215
CHARITY, <i>Worth Tuttle</i>	222
"—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN' WORD," <i>Vernon Loggins</i>	240
✓THE LAST FULL MEASURE, <i>Marian Sims</i>	257
EXCURSION INTO DIMENSION, <i>Benjamin Appel</i>	265
✓THE FLY, <i>Luigi Pirandello</i>	279

# CONTENTS

✓PRELUDE TO LOVE, <i>Ogden W. Heath</i>	290
THE PEARL, <i>Ogden W. Heath</i>	304
MR. ONION, <i>Dana Burnett</i>	324
COCKTAIL PARTY, <i>Janet Curren Owen</i>	340
THE ROUNDHOUSE, <i>John Kemmerer</i>	349
DROUGHT, <i>Phil Stong</i>	358
THE END OF THE PARTY, <i>Christopher Gerould</i>	372
✓HE WILL NEVER KNOW, <i>Richard Sherman</i>	378
HOUND OF CYCLOPS, <i>P. M. Sterling</i>	383
GUIDANCE, <i>Margaret Widdemer</i>	391
BLACK WATER, <i>Alice Buchanan</i>	394
✓A TRIP TO CZARDIS, <i>Edwin Granberry</i>	402
THE TALE OF THE WHITE DOVE, <i>Carl Carmer</i>	411
TEN PER CENT, <i>Bruce Gould and Beatrice Blackmar</i>	413
✓"THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL," <i>Sarah-Elizabeth Rodger</i>	441
✓STRANGE MORNING, <i>Katharine Brush</i>	459
A CUP OF TEA, <i>Marcel Proust</i>	474
✓A SHIPMENT OF MUTE FATE, <i>Martin Storm</i>	479
PAZALU'K, <i>Grace Kellogg</i>	492
THE INSIDE STORY, <i>Mary Roberts Rinehart</i>	496
BIBLIOGRAPHY	529

## Introduction

**H**ERE are stories that I like, each one for some special quality. They are recent but not limited to any one year or to any one country.

Compiling an anthology is fun. But it has its problems as well as its toils, and the editor needs to ask himself often what it is he is seeking to do. For this anthology I started out with the idea that no one author or group of authors was indispensable (it is astonishing how dispensable most of us mortals are, after all!) and that there were no specific stories that simply had to be included. Some good stories have been anthologized to death, and some mediocre ones have been boosted into disproportionate recognition. There are numerous others that I should have liked to include here if the volume had been like an accordion that could stretch indefinitely. No collection can bring together all that critics or readers would like to see, and unless a book claims to be inclusive in a narrow field, it should be judged by its contents rather than by its omissions.

There has been of late much palaver about what a short story is or isn't. I, personally, like experimental writing; I enjoy informal narratives of various types and I wish that editors would publish more of them. Yet I do not consider that every piece of narrative fiction is a short story. It need not be poorer for being merely different. Editors sometimes seem unimaginative as to terms and must label a thing either a poem, an article, an essay, or a short story.

The curse of criticism has lately fallen on the "well-made plot" in fiction, as on the "well-made play," which fact makes writing easier for the young person lacking logic or irreconciled to hard work. Many a lad jests at plot who never learned to construct

## INTRODUCTION

one. It is easier to jot down incoherencies, to cut off strips of one's ego and submit them as short stories (sometimes they *are* short) than it is to subject oneself and one's work to the discipline of form. Formlessness is not of itself a claim to praise. The short story, as I see it, does not require a machine-made plot, but a sense of form it does need, as does every work of art. If it have no direction, how can it arrive? It may smash all the ancient rules of unity, but unless it have its own essential unity, how can it produce an effect worth while?

I do not believe in a system of rules for writing fiction. Each story is a live thing and has its own necessities that must be considered, just as each child is in some ways different from any other youngster in the world and, despite recognized principles of child culture, should have the treatment best suited to him. And so a writer needs to understand the fundamental principles that make for effective writing, needs to comprehend the psychology that underlies them so that he can apply them to his own work.

There need be no physical combat in a story, no mechanically arranged struggle, but should there not be some clash of forces—though it be purely of the mind or spirit, though it be only suggested or implied, though it lie in the region of memory, or in a glance at what is to come?

Fiction writers now have more freedom as to stuff and style than formerly, since Proust has taught us how to plumb the memory, since Dorothy Richardson, Joyce, Virginia Woolf and others have shown us the possibilities of the stream of consciousness. But the "interior monologue," with its unedited thoughts, the ragbag of recollections unsorted, has proved a vast bore in the writing of the unskilled. Art really does demand selection and adaptation, a sense of purpose. Not words alone make literature.

A story may show a mood that apparently has no supporting plot, but shouldn't that mood have its own significance and form? A story may touch a mere moment in time, but shouldn't that instant influence either the past or the future? If, when the



## INTRODUCTION

end of it all has been reached, the characters stand exactly as they were before, unchanged in even a slight degree in themselves or in their relation to each other, have we had a story? Not every entertaining piece of narrative fiction is entitled to be so called.

One interesting aspect of today's stories is their variability as to length, yet with an increasing emphasis on brevity and economy. The short-short that presents its tragedy or comedy or satiric philosophy of life in a few hundred words with a brisk effectiveness unhurt by condensation is a popular form.

Gertrude Atherton exclaims that the American short story is neglected, with not a Pulitzer award to its name, while Edward O'Brien asserts that the story in America is more alive and more worthy than in England. While some of the older magazines here are cutting down on the space allowed to fiction and favoring articles on politics or biography in its place, other publications like *Story*, *Esquire*, and so forth, are rising up to feature the short story and to encourage the writing of fiction besides that of the standardized commercial type. Many small magazines of experimental fiction have sprung up of late, and that is a hopeful sign. But not every story published in a "little magazine" is a work of genius and not every one found in a popular magazine is poor.

Not every sordid tale is necessarily good. Haven't some editors and critics leaned a bit too far in that direction? Muck and sweat are not the only realities, and perhaps the sex life of the underprivileged and uninhibited has been slightly overemphasized. Stories of folk simplicity, tales of the proletariat, are excellent—when they are—but hasn't the intellectual its place, too?

I think that the outlook for the short story in America is good. There is an increasing sincerity in writing, an ability to see different aspects of life, an attempt to present with sympathy and with truth what one has felt or imagined or witnessed. All over the country are young people who wish to be honest with their material and their readers, more mindful of the story values than

## INTRODUCTION

of the size of editorial checks. The story of tomorrow is in their hands.

Writing fiction is a joy, and teaching others to write is an exciting and variable occupation. At least, I find it so in Columbia University, where the afternoon and evening sessions and the flexibility of admission requirements permit a class attendance very different from the average undergraduate group.

The students in my classes in short story writing and the technique of the novel are adults, for the most part, with widely differing backgrounds and experiences. I have had in my classes lawyers, doctors, ministers and priests, college professors and faculty wives, newspaper men and women, editorial assistants on magazines, social workers, countesses, disabled veterans, débutantes, missionaries on leave. One young man earned his living as a blood donor, and one of my most gifted young women last year worked as a waitress in a restaurant in order to have a chance to write her novel. Advance applications for next term are from a Fifth Avenue fashion model and a Westchester housemaid. Each class is an omnibus of stories itself. The chief test, almost the only one, for admission to these classes in creative writing is the ability to write.

To see a student's story take form and achieve publication is a thrill. To watch a novel come to maturity under class discussions has its deep satisfactions. In a recent contest for a prize of \$10,000 offered for the best first novel, of the four manuscripts held for final decision, two were by my students. The prize went to an outsider, alas, but we felt that that was a decent percentage. Better luck next time, perhaps.

I have wished to illustrate various forms of the story of today, from the experimental transcript from the "little magazine" to the popular story of the commercial magazine of large circulation. The order in which the stories appear does not indicate order of preference necessarily, but rather a desire to vary the grouping, to alternate the long and the short, the tragic and the

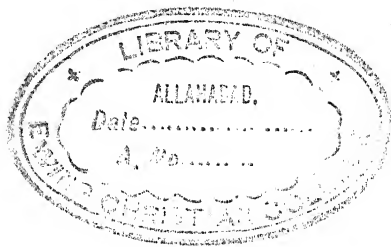
## INTRODUCTION

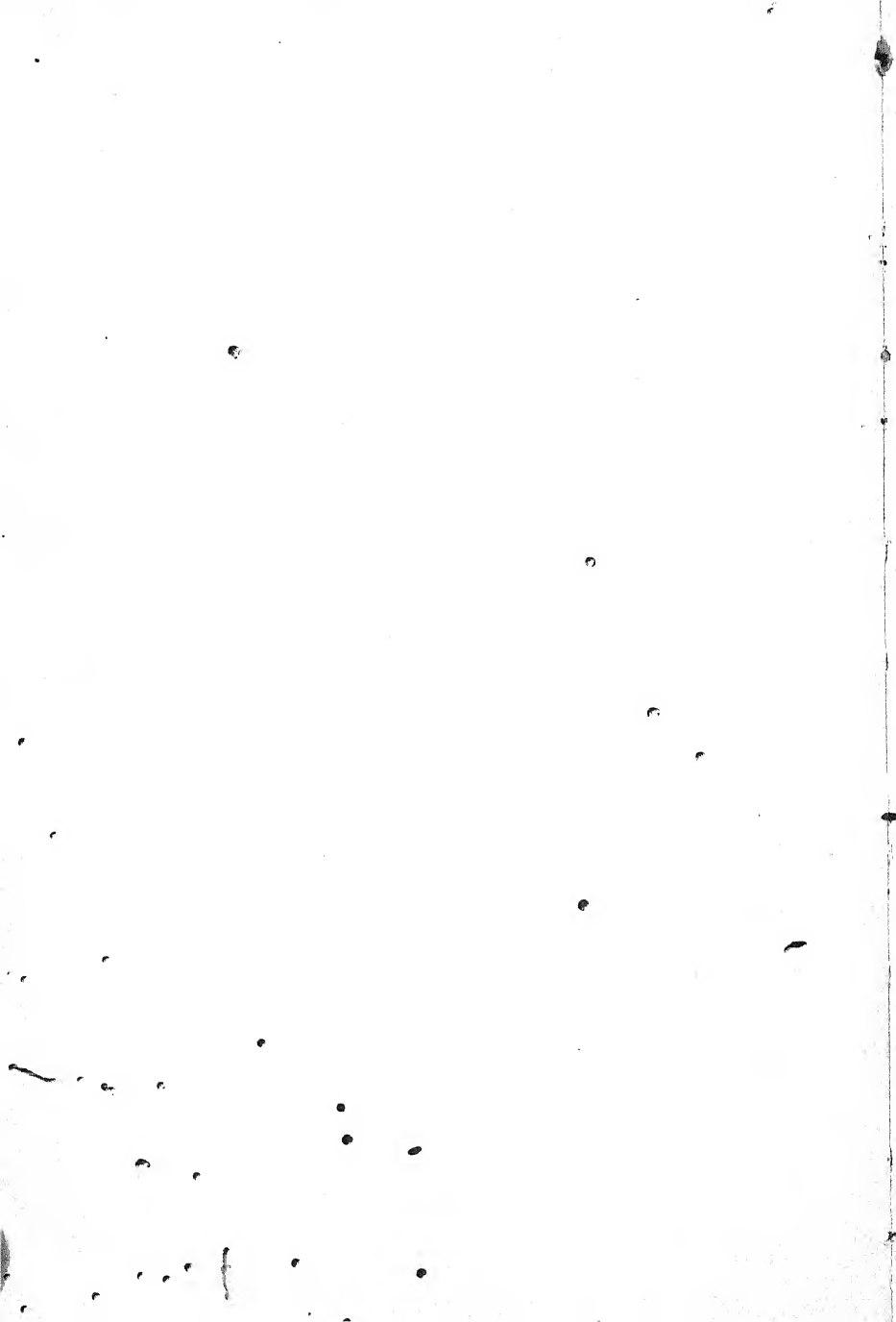
humorous, and so forth. Of the stories included here, nine are by students or former students of mine.

The instructors who may use this book in their classrooms will, I hope, be pleased that I have not filled the scant space with machinery of criticism or detailed lists of books. The stories are the important thing, and a reader likes to approach them with an open mind, to form his own opinions of them, gain his own impressions.

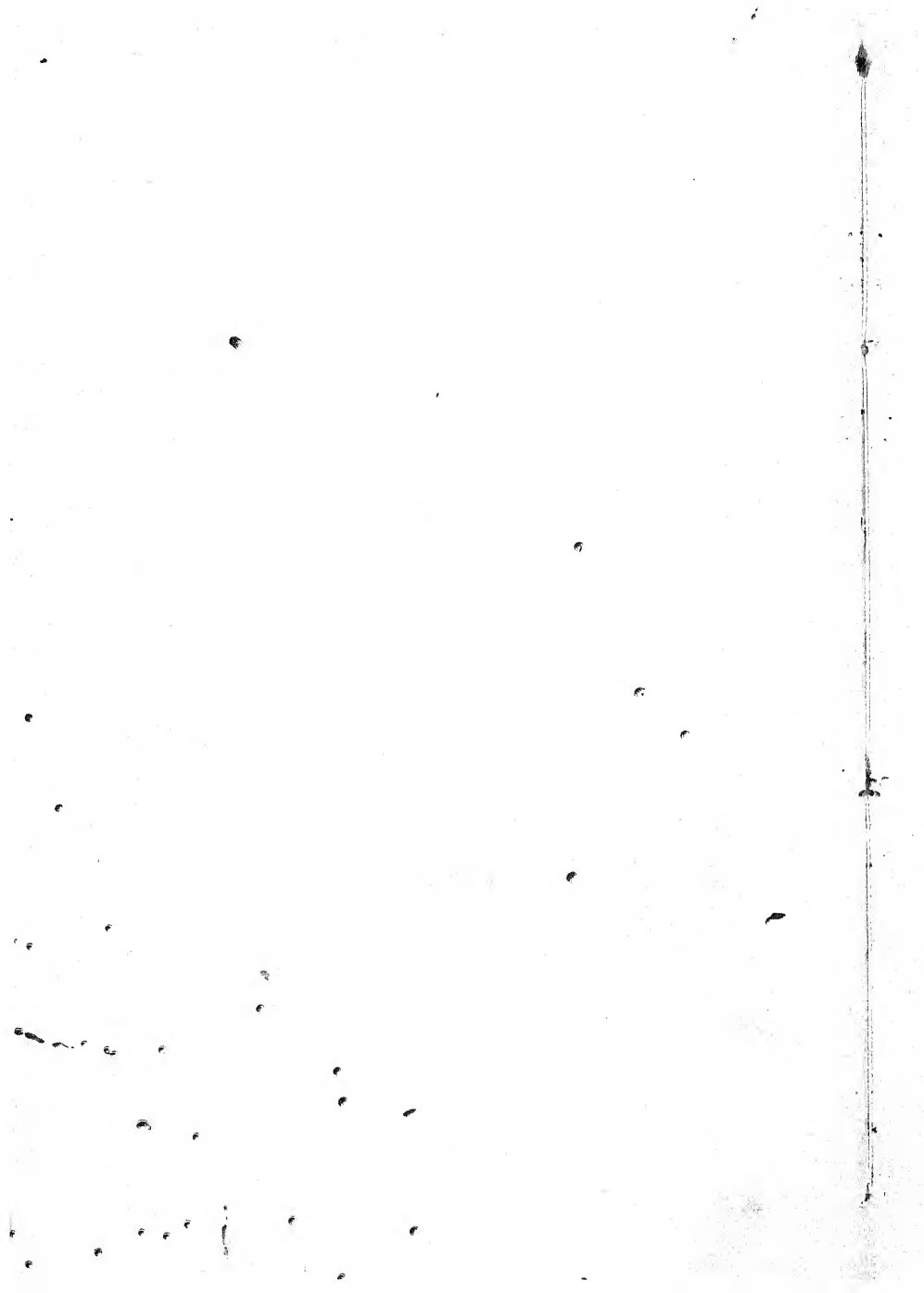
DOROTHY S. CARBOROUGH.

*Columbia University,  
New York City.  
April, 1935.*





SELECTED  
SHORT STORIES  
OF TODAY



## *Levy* A Student in Economics\*

GEORGE MILBURN

*George Milburn is one of the sincere writers of life in America today. His work appears in the magazines of high standards and compels respect for its honesty and its craftsmanship. The college story is too often a conventionalized thing, dealing with athletic victory or successful romance. A Student in Economics is a moving account of a depression student and his experiences. It first appeared in Harper's Magazine.*

ALL of the boys on the third floor of Mrs. Gooch's approved rooms for men had been posted to get Charlie Wingate up that afternoon. He had to go to see the Dean. Two or three of them forgot all about it and two or three of them had other things to do, but Eddie Barbour liked waking people up. Eddie stuck his weasel face in at Charlie's door just as the alarm clock was giving one last feeble tap. The clock stood on the bottom of a tin washpan that was set upside-down on a wooden chair beside the bed. The alarm had made a terrific din. Eddie had heard it far down the hall. The hands showed two o'clock. Pale needles from a December sun were piercing the limp green window shade in a hundred places.

Eddie Barbour yelled, "Aw right, Charlie! Snap out of it!" He came into the chilly room and stood for a moment staring vaguely at the ridge of quilts on the sagged iron bed. The only sound was the long, regular sough of Charlie Wingate's breathing. He hadn't heard a thing. Eddie made a sudden grab for the top of the covers, stripped them back and began jouncing the

\* From *No More Trumpets*, by George Milburn. Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1934. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace & Company.

sleeper by the shoulders. Charlie grunted every time the bed springs creaked, but he nuzzled his pillow and went on sleeping. Eddie went over to the study table where a large, white-enamelled water pitcher stood and he came back to the bed with the water, breathing giggles. He tipped the water pitcher a little and a few drops fell on the back of Charlie's neck without waking him. Eddie sloshed the icy water up over the pitcher's mouth. A whole cupful splashed on Charlie's head. Charlie sat up quickly, batting his arms about, and Eddie Barbour whinnied with laughter.

"Arise, my lord, for the day is here," he said, going across and ceremoniously raising the crooked window shade. Charlie sat straight up among the rumpled quilts with his head cocked on one side, staring dully. He had slept with his clothes on. He sat up in bed all dressed, in a soldier's brown uniform, all but his shoes and roll puttees.

"You got army to-day?" Eddie asked, putting the pitcher down.

Charlie looked at him for a moment and blinked. Then he said in a voice stuffy with sleep, "Naw. I had army yesterday. I got army make-up to-day." He worked his mouth, making clapping noises.

"What time you got army make-up, Charlie? When you come in from class you said get you up because you had to go see the Dean at two-thirty."

"Yeah, I do have to go see the Dean at two-thirty. But I got army make-up too. I got to make up drill cuts from three till six." All at once he flopped back down on the bed, sound asleep again.

"Hey!" Eddie cried, jumping forward. "Come out of that! Wake up there, Charlie! You can't sleep no more if you got to see the Dean at two-thirty. You just about got time to make it." He jerked him back up in bed.

"Screw the Dean," Charlie said. "Two hours' sleep ain't enough."

"Is two hours all the sleep you got last night?"

"Where you get the 'last night'? I worked all night last night."



I had classes till noon yesterday. Two hours' sleep was all I got to-day. And darn little more yesterday or the day before. When is Sunday? Sunday's the first day I'm due to get any real sleep. Two hours' sleep is not enough sleep for a man to get."

He plumped his stockinged feet onto the cold floor and got up stiffly. He went over to the washstand, where he picked up his tooth brush and tooth paste and a bar of soap and slowly took his face towel down from beside the warped looking-glass. He came back to where his shoes lay and stood looking at the toilet articles in his hands as if he had forgotten what he meant to do with them. He dumped them on the bed, took the pan with the alarm clock on it and set it on the floor. Then he sat down on the chair and picked up one of the heavy army shoes, held it and felt it and studied it carefully before he put it on. He put on the other shoe with equal deliberation and stood up without lacing either of them. He took his things up from the bed and started off for the bathroom, his loose shoes clogging. Eddie Barbour followed him down the drafty hall.

The creosote disinfectant that Mrs. Gooch used in her bathrooms gave off a strong odor. "Dag gum bathroom smells just like a hen coop," Charlie said thickly as he stood in front of the white-specked mirror twisting his face. He wouldn't need a shave for another day. He had a fairly good-looking face, tan and thin, with ringlets of black hair tumbling down over his forehead. His large ears stuck straight out. He looked at his image with dark eyes made narrow by two purplish puffs under them, and he yawned widely.

Eddie Barbour stood leaning against the jamb of the bathroom door. He said, "You ought to try and get more sleep, Charlie."

"Are you telling *me*?" Charlie said, running water in the face bowl. Eddie Barbour was a freshman too.

Charlie Wingate came walking along University Boulevard toward the campus, hunched up in his army overcoat. The raw December wind whipped his face and made him feel wide awake. He passed a bunch of fraternity men pitching horse-

shoes in the drive beside the K.A. house. Two or three, sprucely dressed, gave him impersonal glances as he passed. They did not speak, and he walked past self-consciously, seeing them without looking toward them.

When he reached the business section opposite the campus he turned in at the white-tiled front of The Wigwam. The noon rush was over and Nick was not at the cash register. A few noon "dates" were still sitting in the booths along the wall. Charlie walked straight back along the white-tile counter and sat down on the end stool. Red Hibbert was standing by the coffee urns reading the sports section. When Charlie sat down Red folded his newspaper slowly and came over to wait on him. Charlie sat with his cheeks resting on the heels of his hands.

"How's it, Chollie, old boy, old boy?" Red Hibbert said.

"Not bad. Give me a cup of javy without, and a couple of them Grandma's oatmeal cookies over there, Red. Where's Nick?"

Red scooted the plate with the cookies on it down the glassy white counter top and came along with the cup of black coffee. "This is Nick's day for Kiwanis," he said. "It looks to me like you'd stay home and get some sleep once in a while. You're dyin' on your feet."

"I am going to get some sleep Sunday, don't you never worry. I have to go see the Dean this afternoon. And I got make-up drill at three o'clock. I've got to make up some drill cuts."

"What you got to go see the Dean about?"

"I don't know what about; here's all it said." Charlie reached in his overcoat pocket and pulled out a jagged window envelope and a mimeographed postal card. He pushed the envelope across the counter along with the postal card. "I got that other in the morning mail too."

Red took the printed form from the Dean of Men's office out of the envelope and glanced at it. Then he picked up the postal card. It was headed,

# A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

## FOURTH AND FINAL NOTICE

You are hereby summoned to appear before the chairman of the Student Senate Committee on Freshman Activities, Rm 204 Student Union Bldg., not later than 4 P.M., Friday afternoon. It will be to your advantage not to ignore this summons as you have three previous ones. This is positively the last opportunity you will be given to rectify your delinquency. Should you fail to appear this time, steps will be taken to bring you.

(Signed) J. AUBERY CARSON, Chrmn  
Com. on Frshmn Actvts.

Red waggled the postal card. "What you going to do about this?"

"Tear it up like I did the others, I guess. I know what they want. They want to try and make me buy one of them damn' freshman caps."

"Take a tip from me, Charlie: I'd go see them. It won't hurt nothing, and it might be a lot easier on you in the long run."

"Hell, what can they do?"

"Plenty. They could sick the D.D.M.C.'s onto you."

"Ah! The D.D.M.C.'s, that bunch of amateur ku kluckers!"

"Call 'em amateurs if you want to, Charlie, but it wasn't only but last Friday night they took that little Jew-boy, Sol Lewis, out of the rooming house where I stay. It look to me like they did a pretty professional job on him. They used the buckle-end of a belt on him. They claim he was a stool pigeon for the University."

"Stool pigeon! Ah, you know that guy wasn't a stool pigeon, Red."

"We-ell, I'm not saying one way or the other. Anyhow, that's what you're up against when you take to fooling with that Student Committee on Freshman Activities, Charlie."

"Prexy claimed in his opening address at the first of school that he had put a stop to these masked frats and all this hazing."

"Yeah, he said he had; but how's he going to put a stop to the D.D.M.C.'s? He can't kick out all the biggest shots in the

University, can he? All the big shots on the campus are D.D.M.C.'s. Football stars and fellas like that. You won't see the President kicking guys like that out of the University."

"Maybe not, but—why, hell, that freshman cap business is nothing but a racket. That's all it is. Damn' if I let 'em scare me into paying a dollar for a little old sleazy green cloth cap!"

"O.K., Charlie; I guess you know what you want to do."

"Anyway, how could I get around to see that committee before four o'clock this afternoon, and see the Dean at two-thirty, and go to make-up drill from three till six? I'll be late to drill and get bawled out by the captain again. The captain's already about to flunk me for cuts. That's what's getting me down—Military. It's this Military that's getting me down."

"Jees, I don't know, Charlie; seems like I get a bigger kick out of army than I do any other course I got. They sure learn you more in army than they do in anything else in this University."

"Yeow, you learn plenty in army, all right. But what I don't like is the compulsory part. I don't think they ought to be allowed to make it compulsory for freshmen and sophomores. That's just like they had it over in Germany before they got rid of the Kaiser."

The red-haired boy gave him a startled look. He frowned heavily. "Charlie," he exclaimed, "where are you getting all these radical ideas you been spouting around here lately?" Charlie peered at him. Red's face was set in earnestness.

"Why, that's not a radical idea," Charlie said, pushing back his empty coffee cup. "That's just a plain historical fact, that's all that is. I don't see where they got any right to make Military Training compulsory. This is supposed to be a *free* country. That compulsory stuff is what Mussle-leany and birds like that pull."

"But, Charlie, it's all for your own benefit. The University is just looking out after your own interests."

"How do you figure they're looking out for *my* interests?"

"Well, for one thing, when the next war comes we'll all be

officers, us fellas that got this training in college. We'll go right into the regular army as officers. There's where we'll have the edge on guys that never did take advantage of a college education. Person'ly, when the next war comes along, I'm not hankerin' after any front-line trenches. And you know darn' well they're not going to stick their college-trained officers into front-line trenches to get shot. So there's where I figure us guys in R.O.T.C. will have a big advantage."

"Yeah, you might be right, at that, Red. But I'm not kicking about R.O.T.C. It's just the compulsory part I'm kicking against."

Red perked his head and scowled impatiently. "Charlie, they got to make it compulsory. If it wasn't compulsory, how many of the fellas would enroll in it? They have to make Military compulsory in order to give the fullest benefits. What good could they do if only a few of the fellas was taking it?"

"Anyway, I know some it's not compulsory for," Charlie said stubbornly. "Last night there was a Phi Gam pledge in here bragging about how he got out of Military. He told them at the first of school he didn't want to take Military. They told him he *had* to take it—required of all able-bodied freshmen. Couldn't get his degree without it. So he had to go buy his army shoes. Well, he got the shoe store to send the bill to his old man. His old man is one of these they call 'em pacifists. When his old man gets the bill for his kid's army shoes, maybe you think he don't get the President of this University on long distance and tell him where to head in at. And this kid didn't have to take Military, neither. His old man's a big shot lawyer in the City."

"Yeah, but you got to have pull to get away with that, Charlie."

"That's what I mean, Red. You can get away with plenty in this University if you got the pull."

Charlie Wingate loped up the steps of the Administration Building, hurried through the revolving doors, and walked past

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

hissing steam radiators down the long hall to the Dean of Men's office. He was ten minutes late. Before he opened the frosted-glass door he took out a pair of amber-colored spectacles and put them on. Then he went in and handed his summons to the secretary.

"The Dean will see you in a moment," she said. "Please take a chair."

Charlie sat down and gave an amber-hued glance about the outer office. Three dejected freshmen, holding their green caps, were waiting with him. He recognized none of them, so he picked up a week-old copy of the *Christian Science Monitor* and started to read it. But the room was warm and he immediately went to sleep. He had his head propped back against the wall. The newspaper slipped down into his lap. His amber-colored glasses hid his eyes and no one could see that they were closed. He was awakened by the secretary shaking him. She was smiling and the freshmen were all snickering.

"Wake up and pay for your bed, fella!" one of the freshmen called, and every one laughed heartily.

"I sort of drowsed off. It's so nice and warm in here," Charlie said, apologizing to the pretty secretary.

The Dean of Men got up as he entered and, with his eyes on the slip bearing Charlie's name, said, "Ah, this is Charles Wingate, isn't it?" He grasped Charlie's hand as if it were an honor and pressed a button under the edge of his desk with his other hand. The secretary appeared at the door. "Miss Dunn, will you bring in Wingate's folder—Charles W-i-n-g-a-t-e. How do you like college by now, Wingate? Eyes troubling you?"

"Pretty well, sir. Yes, sir, a little. I wear these glasses."

The secretary came back with the folder and the Dean looked through it briefly. "Well, Wingate, I suppose you're anxious to know why I sent for you. The unpleasant truth is, Wingate, you don't seem to be doing so well in your college work. Your freshman adviser conferred with you twice about this, and this week he turned your case over to me. My purpose, of course, is to help you. Now, to be quite frank, Wingate, you're on the

## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

verge of flunking out. Less than a third of the semester remains, and you have a failing grade in English 101, conditional grades in Psychology 51 and Military Training; three hours of F and four hours of D, almost half your total number of hours. On the other hand, you have an A average in Spanish 1 and a B in Economics 150. Wingate, how do you account for your failing English when you are an A student in Spanish?"

"To tell you the truth, sir, I got behind on my written work in English, and I've never been able to catch up. And I don't really have to study Spanish. My father is a railway section foreman in my home town, and he's always had a gang of Mexicans working for him. I've been speaking Mexican ever since I was a kid. It's not the pure, what they call Castilian, Spanish, but I probably know almost as much Spanish as my professor."

"How about this B in Economics? That's a fairly high grade."

"Yes, sir. Doctor Kenshaw—he's my Ec professor—doesn't give exams. Instead he gives every one a B until he calls for our term papers. We don't recite in his class. We just listen to him lecture. And the grade you get on your term paper is your semester grade."

"Ah! What you students term a pipe course, eh, Wingate?"

"Not exactly, sir. We have to do a lot of outside reading for the term paper. But I'm counting on keeping that B in Ec."

"That's fine, Wingate. But it appears to me that it's high time you were getting busy on some of these other grades, too. Why can't you dig in and pull these D's up to B's, and this F up to at least a C? You've got it in you. You made an unusually high grade on your entrance exams, your record shows. Graduated from high school with honors. What's the trouble, Wingate? Tell me!"

"I don't know, sir, except I work at night and—"

"Oh, I see it here on your enrollment card now. Where do you work?"

"I work nights for Nick Pappas, down at The Wigwam."

"How many hours a night do you work?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Ten hours, sir. From nine till seven. The Wigwam stays open all night. I eat and go to eight o'clock class when I get off."

"Very interesting, Wingate. But don't you suppose that it would be advisable to cut down a bit on this outside work and attend a little more closely to your college work? After all, that's what you're here for, primarily—to go to college, not work in a café."

"I couldn't work fewer hours and stay in school, sir. I just barely get by as it is. I get my board at The Wigwam, and I pay my room rent, and I've been paying out on a suit of clothes. That leaves only about a dollar a week for all the other things I have to have."

"Wingate, shouldn't you earn more than that, working ten hours?"

"I get the regular, first-year-man rate, sir. Twenty-five cents an hour. It's set by the University. Nick takes out for board."

"Can't you arrange for a little financial support from home?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid I couldn't. I have two brothers and two sisters at home younger than I am. It wouldn't be right for me to ask my father to send money out of what he makes."

"But surely you could get out and land something a little more lucrative than this all-night restaurant job, Wingate."

"No, sir. Twenty-five cents is the standard rate for working students, and I haven't found anything better. Nick says he has at least twenty men on the waiting list for this job I have."

"Well, there's this about it, Wingate. The University is here, supported by the taxpayers of this State, for the purpose of giving the young men and women of this State educational opportunities. The University is not here for the purpose of training young men to be waiters in all-night restaurants. And, so far as I can see, that's about all you are deriving from your University career. So it occurs to me that you should make a choice: either find some way to devote more attention to your college work or drop out of school altogether. We are very loath to encourage students who are *entirely* self-supporting.



## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

And yet, I will admit that I know any number of first-rate students who are entirely self-supporting. There's Aubery Carson, for example. Quarterback on the football team, delegate to the Olympics, president of the Student Senate, and he's a straight A student. Aubery Carson was telling me only last week that he hasn't had any financial assistance from home since he enrolled as a freshman. Aubery is a fine example of the working student."

"Yes, sir; but look at the job Carson has. He works for a big tobacco company, and all he has to do is hand out Treasure Trove cigarettes to other students. The tobacco company pays him a good salary for passing out samples of their cigarettes."

"Why, Wingate, you surely must be mistaken about that. I don't believe Aubery Carson smokes. In fact, I know he doesn't smoke. He's one of the finest all-round athletes in this country."

"No, sir; I don't say he smokes either. But that's the straight stuff about his job with the cigarette company. They figure it's a good advertisement to have a popular guy like Aubery Carson passing out Treasure Trove. Sort of an endorsement."

"All the same, Wingate, it doesn't reflect a very good attitude on your part, criticizing the way one of your fellow students earns his college expenses."

"Oh, I didn't mean to criticize him, sir. I was only saying—"

"Yes, yes, I know; but all this is beside the point. We're here to discuss the state of your grades, Wingate. The fact is, you are on probation right now. As you must know, any student who is passing in less than half his work is automatically suspended from the University and must return to his home. Now one F more and out you'll go, Wingate. That's just being frank with you."

"I'd hate to have to go back home like that, sir."

"Well, you'd have to. If you flunk out, the University authorities are obliged to see that you return to your home immediately."

"I'd hate that, sir. I'd hate to go back home and have to live off my family, and that's probably what I'd have to do. I had

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

a letter from mother yesterday, and she says that nearly all the boys who graduated from high school with me are still there, loafing on the streets and living off their old folks. I don't like that idea. Mother's proud of me because I'm working my way through college. You know there are not many jobs to be had nowadays, sir, and I'd hate to have to go back home and loaf."

"It is a problem, I'll confess, Wingate. But what's the point in your coming to the University and working all night in a café and then flunking your class work? Moreover, your freshman adviser reports that you make a practice of sleeping in class. Is that true?"

"Well, yes, sir. I suppose I do drop off sometimes."

"Pretty impossible situation, isn't it, Wingate? Well, I've given you the best advice I can. Unless you can alter your circumstances I suggest that you withdraw from the University at once. We have six thousand other students here who need our attention, and the University has to be impartial and impersonal in dealing with these problems. Unless you can find some means to avoid flunking out I suggest withdrawing beforehand."

"Withdrawal would be a disgrace to me, sir. If I withdrew and went back home now, every one at home would say that I had been expelled. You know how small towns are."

"Ah, now, Wingate, when you begin dealing with small-town gossip, I fear you're really getting outside my province. But I should think you'd prefer honorable withdrawal to flunking out."

"I believe I'll try to stick it through, sir. I'll try to remove the conditional grades, and maybe I can luck through on my finals."

"I hope you can, Wingate. As long as you feel that way about it, good luck to you." The Dean of Men stood up. Charlie stood up too. The Dean put out his hand and showed his teeth in a jovial smile and bore down hard on Charlie's knuckles. "I'm counting on you strong, old man," he said, encircling Charlie's shoulders with his left arm. "I know you have the stuff and that you'll come through with flying colors one of these days."

"Thank you, sir," Charlie said, grinning tearfully while the

## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

Dean gave his shoulder little pats. He edged toward the door as soon as the Dean released him, but when he reached it he hesitated and pulled the postal card out of his pocket. "Oh, pardon me, sir, but there's something I forgot to ask you. I got this in the mail to-day. I've been a little bothered about what to do about it."

The Dean of Men took the mimeographed card and read it quickly. "Why, I should say that you ought to go see what they want, Wingate. You shouldn't ignore things of this sort, you know. It's all a part of the normal activities of college life. No reason for antagonizing your fellow-students by ignoring a request of this kind."

"All right, sir; I'll go see them."

"Why, to be sure, go see them! Always keep in mind that the University is a social as well as an educational institution," Wingate.

Room 204, Student Union Building, was a newly finished, rather barren office that smelled dankly of lime in the fresh plaster. It was fitted with a metal desk painted to imitate painted walnut, a large brass spittoon, a square metal waste-paper basket, a green metal filing cabinet, a large bank calendar, a huge paste-board shipping case, and J. Aubery Carson, who had the freshman cap concession.

Charlie Wingate hesitantly opened the door and saw J. Aubery Carson tilted back in a chair, his feet on the metal walnut desk, reading a copy of *Ballyhoo*.

"Co-ome in! Co-ome in!" J. Aubery Carson called loudly without putting down his magazine. "All right, old timer. What's on your mind?"

Charlie held out the mimeographed card. Carson held his magazine a moment longer before accepting the card. He shoved his hat down over one eye, turning the card, looking first at the back, then at the name on the front. "Um-m-m," he grunted. He reached over to a drawer in the filing cabinet without taking his feet down and flipped through the cards. He looked at

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

the name on the postal card again, pulled a card out of the file, and drew his thick lips up into a rosette. He looked at the file card in silence.

"Wingate," he said at last in a severe tone, "you have been dilatory. Indeed, Wingate, I might even go so far as to say you have been remiss. At the beginning of this semester you applied for and received a refund on your student ticket fee. That signifies that you have not attended a single football game this season, and that you have no intention of honoring any of the University's athletic spectacles with your presence this season. Also, the record discloses that you did not register at the Y.M.C.A. freshman mixer. Neither did you respond to polite solicitation for a trifling monetary pledge to the Memorial Stadium Fund. And, most heinous offense of all, Wingate, we find that you have yet to pay in one dollar for your freshman cap, prescribed by your seniors and purveyed to you on a non-profit basis by the Student Committee on Freshman Activities. And yet, Wingate, I find you duly enrolled and attending classes in this here now University. Wingate, what possible excuse do you have for such gross neglect of University tradition? Speak up!"

Charlie said meekly, "Well, I work nights and it's hard for me to get here in the daytime, and I can't afford to buy a cap."

"What's this!" Carson exclaimed, jerking his legs down from the desk top and banging the desk with two flat hands. "Why, boy, this is treason! You mean you can't afford *not* to buy a freshman cap."

"No, I just came to tell you that a dollar has to go a long way with me and that I need every cent I earn to stay in school. So I wish you'd please excuse me from buying a freshman cap."

Carson's lean, florid face suddenly became rigid and he stuck his jaw out with his lower teeth showing and, in spite of his marcelled taffy pompadour and his creased tailored suit, he again looked very much as he did in all the sporting section photographs. "See here, Wingate," he said, hard-lipped, "you're still a freshman at this University. You'll have to wait another year before you can start saying what you will do and won't do, see?"

## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

Now we've been patient with you. You've been in school here three months without putting on a freshman cap. Do you realize that over eighty-five per cent of the freshman class came in here and bought their caps before the first week of school ended? Now who do you think *you* are, Wingate—Mr. God? You're going to get you a cap, and you're going to wear it. See? No ifs, ands, or buts about it. And if you don't leave this office with a green cap on your head then I don't mind telling you that we've got ways of getting one on you before another day passes."

"Well, if I buy one it's going to put me in a bad hole. All the money I've got is what I saved out to pay my room rent this week."

"Listen, fella, if we let horsefeathers like that go here, half the freshman class wouldn't be wearing freshman caps right now. Now I've said all I'm going to to you. Do you want your green cap now or will you wait till later? That's all I want to know. I don't aim to give you any high-pressure sales talk on something that's already been decided for you. Take it or leave it."

Carson reached over into the large pasteboard box, groped far down in it, and brought forth a small green monkey cap. He tossed it on the desk. Charlie Wingate stuck his forefinger in his watch pocket and pulled out a small pad of three carefully folded dollar bills. He unfolded them and laid one on the desk and picked up the cap. Carson put the dollar in his pocket and stood up.

Charlie stood holding his cap. He scuffed the cement floor with his shoe toe and began doggedly, "The only thing is—"

"Aw, that's O.K., Wingate, old man," Carson said suavely. "No hard feelings whatsoever." He held out a freshly opened pack of cigarettes. "Here, have a Treasure Trove on me before you go."

That night all the stools along the counter at The Wigwam were filled when Charlie Wingate came in, still dusty from the drill field. He got himself a set-up back of the counter and went into the kitchen. He moved about the steam-table, dishing

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

up his dinner. He dragged a stool over to a zinc-covered kitchen table and sat down to eat. The kitchen was warm and steamy and the air was thick with the odors of sour chili grease and yellow soap melting in hot dishwater. Charlie's fork slipped through his fingers, and he began nodding over his plate.

Fat Kruger, the night dishwasher and short-order cook, yelled, "Hey, there, wake up and pay for your bed!" Charlie jerked his head up and looked at the ponderous, good-humored cook with half-lidded eyes. "Why'n't you try sleeping in bed once in a wile, Charlie?" Fat said in a friendly tone. "You're going to kill yourself if you don't watch out, trying to go without sleep."

"Don't worry, Fat. I can take it," Charlie said.

Almost two hours had to pass before it would be the hour for him to come on, but not time enough for him to walk back to his room and catch a nap, so he took the book on which he had to make an outside reading report in Economics 150 and went up to the last booth to study until nine o'clock. He fell asleep and he did not wake up until Red Hibbert, going off, shook him and told him that it was almost time for him to come on. He closed his book and went back to the washroom. The acrid stench of the mothballs that Nick used to deodorize the latrine cleared his head. He took down his apron and tied it on over his army breeches. Then he slipped into a white coat.

The usual black-coffee addicts came dribbling in. When the telephone rang, Charlie answered it, jotting down short orders to go. The delivery boy came in and went out and banged off on his motorcycle with paper bags full of "red hots" and nickel hamburgers and coffee in paper cylinders. The Wigwam's white tile shone under the inverted alabaster urns. There was a pale pink reflection in the plate-glass window as the Neon sign outside spelled and re-spelled "Wigwam Eats. Open All Night." A party of drunken Betas came in at ten-thirty and seated themselves noisily in the last booth. They tossed Charlie's economics book out into the aisle with a whoop, and he came and picked it up and took their orders in silence while they kidded him about his flap ears and the grease on his white coat. At eleven

## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

o'clock the last whistle at the University power house blew for the closing hour, and a couple of lingering "dates" scurried out. Finally the drunks left, after one had been sick in a corner of the booth. The delivery boy came coasting up at midnight and checked in and roared away again on his motorcycle. The long small hours began inching past.

At one o'clock Charlie finished cleaning up the drunk's mess and he had cleared off the last of the tables. The Wigwam was empty, so he opened the book he must read for Econ 150. He had read a few lines when a bunch of girls from the Theta house down the street came charging in, giggling and talking in gasps and screams, their fur coats clutched over their sleeping pajamas. It was long after the closing hour, and they told Charlie to keep an eye out for the University night watchman. They took up the two back booths and they consulted The Wigwam's printed menu card without failing to read aloud the lines "Nick (Pericles) Pappas," "We Employ Student Help Exclusively," and "Please Do Not Tip. A Smile Is Our Reward" with the customary shrieks. Nearly all ordered filet mignon and French fries, which were not on the menu, but two or three ordered pecan waffles and coffee, which were. When he had served their orders Charlie went back to his book again, but the low buzz of their talk and their sudden spurts of laughter disturbed him and he could not read. At a quarter of two they began peering round corners of their booths. They asked Charlie in stage-whispers if the coast were clear.

Charlie went to the door and looked out on the street and beckoned widely with his arm. They trooped out with their fur coats pulled tight, their fur-trimmed silken mules slapping their bare heels. Charlie went on back to clear away their dishes. They had left about thirty cents as a tip, all in cents and nickels. The coins were carefully imbedded in the cold steak grease and gluey syrup and putty-colored cigarette leavings on their plates. Charlie began stacking the plates without touching the money. He carried the dirty dishes back and set them through the open-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

ing in the kitchen wall. Fat Kruger came to the opening and Charlie went back to his book.

Fat called, "Hey, Charlie, you leavin' this tip again?"

"You're damn' right, I'm leaving it!" Charlie said. "I can get along without their tips. They leave it that way every time. I guess they think I'll grabble on their filthy plates to get a lousy thirty cents. It takes a woman to think up something like that."

"Charlie, you're too proud. I don't see where you can afford to be so proud. They way I figure it, thirty cents is thirty cents."

"Hell, I'm not proud, Fat. I just try to keep my self-respect. When those sorority sows come in and plant their tips in the dirt and grease of their plates, damn' if I'll lower myself to grub it out."

He sat down on a counter stool with the economics book before him, trying to fix his mind on it. He read a page. The print became thin blurred parallels of black on the page. His eyelids kept drooping shut and he propped the muscles with his palms at his temples, trying to keep his eyes open. His head jerked forward and he caught it and began reading again. Soon his face lowered slowly through his hands and came to rest on the open book.

Fat Kruger came through the kitchen swinging door and tiptoed up front. Fat stood grinning, watching Charlie sleep. Cramped over with his head on the counter, Charlie snored softly. Fat gave his head a gentle shove, and Charlie started up to catch his balance.

"For God's sakes, guy, you're *dead!*" Fat howled. "Don't you never get no sleep except like that?"

"What time is it?" Charlie said, yawning and arching his back.

"Half-past two."

"Jees, is that all?"

"Charlie, g<sup>o</sup> back there and lay down on the kitchen table. I'll watch the front for you. Nobody'll be coming in for a while."

As he was talking old Uncle Jim Hudson ambled in, a bundle of sweaters, overcoats, and grizzled dewlaps, his black timeclock swung over one shoulder by a leather lanyard. Uncle Jim laid



## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

his long, nicked flashlight carefully on the counter and eased himself onto a stool. He ordered a cup of black coffee and in a lecherous wheeze began telling dirty stories selected from his twenty years' experience as a campus night-watchman. Fat Kruger nickered loudly after each telling, and Charlie jerked his eyes open and smiled sleepily. It was three-thirty when Uncle Jim left. Charlie opened his book again.

"Charlie, I wouldn't put my eyes out over that damn' book if I was you, when you're dyin' for sleep," Fat said.

"I've got to get it read, Fat. It's my outside reading in Economics and the whole semester grade depends on it. It's the hardest book to keep your mind on you ever saw. I've been reading on it for over a month and I'm only half through, and he's going to call for these reports any day now. If I flunk Ec I flunk out of school."

"Why mess with reading it? I know a guy over at the Masonic Dorm who'll read it and write your report for two bucks. He writes all my English themes for me, and I'm making a straight A in English. He only charges fifty cents for short themes and two bucks for term papers. You ought to try him."

"Hell, Fat, you get five dollars a week from home. Where am I going to get two dollars for hiring a guy to read this book?"

"Charlie, I just can't figure you out. You never do get any real sleep. You sure must want a college education bad. It don't look to me like you would figure it's worth it."

"Oh, it's worth it! It's a big satisfaction to my folks to have me in college. And, where can a man without a college degree get nowadays? But I'll tell you the truth, I didn't know it was going to be like this when I came down here last Fall. I used to read *College Humor* in high school, and when fellows came home from University for the holidays, all dressed up in snappy clothes, talking about dates and football and dances, and using college slang—well, I had a notion I'd be like that when I got down here. The University publicity department sent me a little booklet showing how it was easy to work your way through college. So here I am. I haven't had a date or been to a dance or

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

seen a football game since I enrolled. And there are plenty of others just like me. I guess I'm getting a college education, all right—but the only collegiate thing I've been able to do is go to sleep in class."

"How you get by with sleeping in class, Charlie?"

"I wear those colored spectacles and prop myself, and the profs can't see I've got my eyes closed."

Fat wagged his heavy face mournfully. "Boy, it sure is tough when a man don't get his sleep."

"Yeah, it is," Charlie said, looking down at his book again. "I'll get a break pretty soon, though. I'd rather chop off a hand than to flunk out of University before I'd even finished one semester."

⑥ The tardiest of the hundred students enrolled in Dr. Sylvester C. O. Kenshaw's Economics 150 straggled into the lecture room and made their ways to alphabetically-assigned chairs with much scuffling and trampling of toes and mumbled apologies. Ec 150, renowned as a pipe course, was always crowded. Doctor Kenshaw was the celebrated author of seven textbooks on economics, five of which his students were required to buy each semester. Doctor Kenshaw's national reputation as an economist permitted him to be erratic about meeting his classes, but fame had never dimmed his fondness for student flattery. The only students who ever flunked Ec 150 were those who gave affront to Doctor Kenshaw by neglecting to buy his textbooks or by not laughing at his wit or by being outrageously inattentive to his lectures.

Doctor Kenshaw was late that morning. Charlie Wingate sat in his chair on the back row in an agony of waiting. He had on his amber glasses and he could fall asleep as soon as Doctor Kenshaw opened his lecture. But he had to stay awake until then. There was a slow ache in the small of his back. The rest of his body was numb. He had not taken off his army shoes for twenty hours, and his feet were moist and swollen. Every time he shifted position his arms and legs were bathed in prickling fire. He kept

## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

his eyes open behind the amber lenses, watching the clock. Small noises of the classroom came to him as a low, far-off humming.

When the clock on the front wall showed nine after eleven the seated class began stirring as if it were mounted on some eccentric amusement-park device. Excited whispers eddied out on the warm air of the steam-heated lecture room. "He's giving us another cut!" "He's not meeting this class to-day!" "He's got one more minute to make it!" "Naw; six more! You have to wait fifteen minutes on department heads."

There was a seething argument on this point, but when the clock showed fourteen minutes after eleven a bold leader sprang up and said, "Come on, everybody!" All but five or six especially conscientious students rose and milled after him toward the door. Charlie Wingate followed, thoroughly awakened by the chance of getting to bed so soon. The leader yanked the door open and Doctor Kenshaw stumbled in, all out of breath, his eyeglasses steamed, his pointed gray beard quivering, a vain little man in a greenish-black overcoat.

"Go back to your seats!" Doctor Kenshaw commanded sternly as soon as he could get his breath. He marched over to his lecture table and planked down his leather brief case. He took off his overcoat and began wiping the steam from his eyeglasses while the students hurried back to their chairs. "It does seem to me," he said, his voice quavering with anger, "that it would be no more than courteous for this class to await my arrival on those rare occasions when I am delayed. Day after day you come lagging into my classes, and I have always been extremely lenient in giving credit for attendance, no matter how tardy your arrival. Certainly it is no more than my privilege to ask that you wait for me occasionally."

A few students exchanged meaning glances. "They meant, 'Now we're in for it. The old boy has on one of his famous mads.'"

"To-day, I believe I shall forego delivering my prepared lecture," Doctor Kenshaw went on in a more even voice, but with

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

elaborate sarcasm, "and let *you* do the talking. Perhaps it would be meet to hear a few outside reading reports this morning. All of you doubtless are aware that these reports were due last week, although I had not expected to call for them at once. I trust that I have impressed you sufficiently with the importance of these reports. They represent to me the final result of your semester's work in this course. The grades you receive on these reports will be your grades for the semester. Let us begin forthwith. When your name is called, you will rise and read your report to the class." He opened his roll book.

"Mr. Abbott!" he called. Mr. Abbott stammered an excuse. Doctor Kenshaw passed coldly on to Miss Adams, making no comment. All through the A's it was the same. But with the B's an ashen, spectacled Miss Ballentyne stood up and began reading in a droning voice her report on "The Economic Consequences of the Peace." Obviously Doctor Kenshaw was not listening to her. His hard little eyes under craggy brows were moving up one row and down the other, eager for a victim. On the back row, Charlie Wingate's propped legs had given way and he had slipped far down into his seat, fast asleep. When Doctor Kenshaw's preying eyes reached Charlie they stopped moving. Someone tittered nervously and then was silent as Doctor Kenshaw jerked his head round in the direction of the noise. Miss Ballentyne droned on.

When she had finished, Doctor Kenshaw said dryly, "Very good, Miss Ballentyne, very good indeed. Er—ah—would someone be kind enough to arouse the recumbent young gentleman in the last row?"

There was a murmur of laughter while everyone turned to look at Milton Weismann nudging Charlie Wingate. Doctor Kenshaw was running down the list of names in his small record book. Milton Weismann gave Charlie another stiff poke in the ribs, and Charlie sprang up quickly. Everyone laughed loudly at that.

"Mr.—ah—*Wingate*, isn't it? Mr. Wingate, your report."

"Pardon me, sir?"

## A STUDENT IN ECONOMICS

"Mr. Wingate, what was the title of the book assigned to you for report in this class?"

"*Theory of the Leisure Class* by Veblen, sir."

"Ah, then, that's the explanation. So you were assiduously engaged in evolving your own theory of the leisure class. Is that right, Mr. Wingate? You have evidently concluded that Economics 150 is the leisure class."

The class rocked with laughter. Doctor Kenshaw, pleased with his pun and flattered by the response to it, found it hard to keep his face straight. Suddenly he was back in good humor. "Mr. Wingate's theory is quite apparently one to which the majority of this class subscribes. Now I try to be lenient with students in this class. Surely no one could describe me as a hard taskmaster. But I resent your implication that I have been too easygoing. Now these reading reports were assigned to you last September, and you have had ample time to prepare them. I'll not call for any more of them to-day, but at the next session of this class I expect every one of these papers in. As for you, Mr. Wingate, if you'll see me directly after class, I'll be glad to hear any explanation or apology that you may wish to make. I want most of all to be fair. I have always given every student the benefit of the doubt until a student deliberately flaunts me with his indifference. But I am capable of being quite ruthless, I assure you."

"Thank you, sir," Charlie mumbled. He entered a slow torture, trying to keep awake until the class bell rang. He rolled his hot, red-veined eyes up with drunken precision to see the clock. Fifteen minutes had to pass before the bell would ring.

When the bell rang the class arose quickly and began clumping out. Several co-eds and men, politickers and apple-polishers wangling for A's, crowded about the lecture table, Doctor Kenshaw always remained behind after each class to accept their homage. But to-day he looked up over the heads of the eager group. He silenced their inane questions and flagrant compliments by placing his right forefinger against his thin, unsmiling lips. "Sh-h-h!" he said. The apple-polishers turned their heads in

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

the direction of his gaze and then, giggling softly, tiptoed away. When the last had gone out, Doctor Kenshaw unscrewed his fountain pen and opened his roll book. He ran his finger down the list until he came to "Wingate, C." and in the space opposite under "Smstr Grd" he marked a precise little F.

A whiffling snore escaped Charlie Wingate in the back of the room. Doctor Kenshaw looked back across the varnished chair rows with a frown of annoyance. He took his overcoat from its hanger, slipped into it, and strapped up his brief case. He jammed on his hat and strode out of the lecture room, slamming the door. The noise made a hollow echo in the empty room, but it did not disturb Charlie Wingate. He slept on behind his amber glasses.

## Tobermory\*

SAKI

*H. H. Munro, so well known as "Saki," was one of the most brilliant and sophisticated writers of England. His death was a loss to letters. Tobermory is a delightful, and representative, example of his work.*

IT was a chill, rain-washed afternoon of a late August day, that indefinite season when partridges are still in the security of cold storage, and there is nothing to hunt—unless one is bounded on the north by the Bristol Channel, in which case one may lawfully gallop after fat red stags. Lady Blemley's house party was not bounded on the north by the Bristol Channel, hence there was a full gathering of her guests round the tea-table on this particular afternoon. And, in spite of the blankness of the season and the triteness of the occasion, there was no trace in the company of that fatigued restlessness which means a dread of the pianola and a subdued hankering for auction bridge. The undisguised, open-mouthed attention of the entire party was fixed on the homely, negative personality of Mr. Cornelius Appin. Of all her guests, he was the one who had come to Lady Blemley with the vaguest reputation. Some one had said he was "clever," and he had got his invitation in the moderate expectation, on the part of his hostess, that some portion at least of his cleverness would be contributed to the general entertainment. Until tea-time that day she had been unable to discover in what direction, if any, his cleverness lay. He was neither a wit nor a croquet champion, a hypnotic force, nor a begetter of amateur theatricals. Neither did his exterior

\* From *The Short Stories of H. H. Munro (Saki)*. Copyright 1930 by The Viking Press, Inc., New York. Reprinted by permission of The Viking Press, Inc.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

suggest the sort of man in whom women are willing to pardon a generous measure of mental deficiency. He had subsided into mere Mr. Appin, and the Cornelius seemed a piece of transparent baptismal bluff. And now he was claiming to have launched on the world a discovery beside which the invention of gunpowder, of the printing-press, and of steam locomotion were inconsiderable trifles. Science had made bewildering strides in many directions during recent decades, but this thing seemed to belong to the domain of miracle rather than to scientific achievement.

"And do you really ask us to believe," Sir Wilfrid was saying, "that you have discovered a means for instructing animals in the art of human speech, and that dear old Tobermory has proved your first successful pupil?"

"It is a problem at which I have worked for the last seventeen years," said Mr. Appin, "but only during the last eight or nine months have I been rewarded with glimmerings of success. Of course I have experimented with thousands of animals, but latterly only with cats, those wonderful creatures which have assimilated themselves so marvellously with our civilization while retaining all their highly developed feral instincts. Here and there among cats one comes across an outstanding superior intellect, just as one does among the ruck of human beings, and when I made the acquaintance of Tobermory a week ago I saw at once that I was in contact with a 'Beyond-cat' of extraordinary intelligence. I had gone far along the road to success in recent experiments; with Tobermory, as you call him, I have reached the goal."

Mr. Appin concluded his remarkable statement in a voice which he strove to divest of a triumphant inflection. No one said "Rats," though Clovis's lips moved in a monosyllabic contortion which probably invoked those rodents of disbelief.

"And do you mean to say," asked Miss Resker, after a slight pause, "that you have taught Tobermory to say and understand easy sentences of one syllable?"

"My dear Miss Resker," said the wonder-worker patiently,



## TOBERMORY

"one teaches little children and savages and backward adults in that piecemeal fashion; when one has once solved the problem of making a beginning with an animal of highly developed intelligence one has no need for those halting methods. Tobermory can speak our language with perfect correctness."

This time Clovis very distinctly said, "Beyond-rats!" Sir Wilfrid was more polite, but equally sceptical.

"Hadh'n't we better have the cat in and judge for ourselves?" suggested Lady Blemley.

Sir Wilfrid went in search of the animal, and the company settled themselves down to the languid expectation of witnessing some more or less adroit drawing-room ventriloquism.

In a minute Sir Wilfrid was back in the room, his face white beneath its tan and his eyes dilated with excitement.

"By Gad, it's true!"

His agitation was unmistakably genuine, and his hearers started forward in a thrill of awakened interest.

Collapsing into an armchair he continued breathlessly: "I found him dozing in the smoking-room, and called out to him to come for his tea. He blinked at me in his usual way, and I said, 'Come on, Toby; don't keep us waiting'; and, by Gad! he drawled out in a most horribly natural voice that he'd come when he dashed well pleased! I nearly jumped out of my skin!"

Appin had preached to absolutely incredulous hearers; Sir Wilfrid's statement carried instant conviction. A Babel-like chorus of startled exclamation arose, amid which the scientist sat mutely enjoying the first fruit of his stupendous discovery.

In the midst of the clamour Tobermory entered the room and made his way with velvet tread and studied unconcern across, to the group seated round the tea-table.

A sudden hush of awkwardness and constraint fell on the company. Somehow there seemed an element of embarrassment in addressing on equal terms a domestic cat of acknowledged mental ability.

"Will you have some milk, Tobermory?" asked Lady Blemley in a rather strained voice.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

“I don’t mind if I do,” was the response, couched in a tone of even indifference. A shiver of suppressed excitement went through the listeners, and Lady Blemley might be excused for pouring out the saucerful of milk rather unsteadily.

“I’m afraid I’ve spilt a good deal of it,” she said apologetically.

“After all, it’s not my Axminster,” was Tobermory’s rejoinder.

Another silence fell on the group, and then Miss Resker, in her best district-visitor manner, asked if the human language had been difficult to learn. Tobermory looked squarely at her for a moment and then fixed his gaze serenely on the middle distance. It was obvious that boring questions lay outside his scheme of life.

“What do you think of human intelligence?” asked Mavis Pellington lamely.

“Of whose intelligence in particular?” asked Tobermory coldly.

“Oh, well, mine for instance,” said Mavis, with a feeble laugh.

“You put me in an embarrassing position,” said Tobermory, whose tone and attitude certainly did not suggest a shred of embarrassment. “When your inclusion in this house party was suggested, Sir Wilfrid protested that you were the most brainless woman of his acquaintance, and that there was a wide distinction between hospitality and the care of the feeble-minded. Lady Blemley replied that your lack of brain-power was the precise quality which had earned you your invitation, as you were the only person she could think of who might be idiotic enough to buy their old car. You know, the one they call ‘The Envy of Sisyphus,’ because it goes quite nicely up-hill if you push it.”

Lady Blemley’s protestations would have had greater effect if she had not casually suggested to Mavis only that morning that the car in question would be just the thing for her down at her Devonshire home.

Major Barfield plunged in heavily to effect a diversion.

“How about your carryings-on with the tortoise-shell puss up at the stables, eh?”

## TOBERMORY

The moment he had said it every one realized the blunder.

"One does not usually discuss these matters in public," said Tobermory frigidly. "From a slight observation of your ways since you've been in this house I should imagine you'd find it inconvenient if I were to shift the conversation on to your own little affairs."

The panic which ensued was not confined to the Major.

"Would you like to go and see if cook has got your dinner ready?" suggested Lady Blemley hurriedly, affecting to ignore the fact that it wanted at least two hours to Tobermory's dinner-time.

"Thanks," said Tobermory, "not quite so soon after my tea. I don't want to die of indigestion."

"Cats have nine lives, you know," said Sir Wilfrid heartily.

"Possibly," answered Tobermory; "but only one liver."

"Adelaide!" said Mrs. Cornett, "do you mean to encourage that cat to go out and gossip about us in the servants' hall?"

The panic had indeed become general. A narrow ornamental balustrade ran in front of most of the bedroom windows at the Towers, and it was recalled with dismay that this had formed a favourite promenade for Tobermory at all hours, whence he could watch the pigeons—and heaven knew what else besides. If he intended to become reminiscent in his present outspoken strain the effect would be something more than disconcerting. Mrs. Cornett, who spent much time at her toilet table, and whose complexion was reputed to be of a nomadic though punctual disposition, looked as ill at ease as the Major. Miss Scrawen, who wrote fiercely sensuous poetry and led a blameless life, merely displayed irritation; if you are methodical and virtuous in private you don't necessarily want every one to know it. Bertie van Tahn, who was so depraved at seventeen that he had long ago given up trying to be any worse, turned a dull shade of gardenia white, but he did not commit the error of dashing out of the room like Odo Finsberry, a young gentleman who was understood to be reading for the Church and who was possibly disturbed at the thought of scandals he might hear con-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

cerning other people. Clovis had the presence of mind to maintain a composed exterior; privately he was calculating how long it would take to procure a box of fancy mice through the agency of the *Exchange and Mart* as a species of hush-money.

Even in a delicate situation like the present, Agnes Resker could not endure to remain too long in the background.

"Why did I ever come down here?" she asked dramatically.

Tobermory immediately accepted the opening.

"Judging by what you said to Mrs. Cornett on the croquet-lawn yesterday, you were out for food. You described the Blemleys as the dullest people to stay with that you knew, but said they were clever enough to employ a first-rate cook; otherwise they'd find it difficult to get any one to come down a second time."

"There's not a word of truth in it! I appeal to Mrs. Cornett—" exclaimed the discomfited Agnes.

"Mrs. Cornett repeated your remark afterwards to Bertie van Tahn," continued Tobermory, "and said, 'That woman is a regular Hunger Marcher; she'd go anywhere for four square meals a day,' and Bertie van Tahn said—"

At this point the chronicle mercifully ceased. Tobermory had caught a glimpse of the big yellow Tom from the Rectory working his way through the shrubbery towards the stable wing. In a flash he had vanished through the open French window.

With the disappearance of his too brilliant pupil Cornelius Appin found himself beset by a hurricane of bitter upbraiding, anxious inquiry, and frightened entreaty. The responsibility for the situation lay with him, and he must prevent matters from becoming worse. Could Tobermory impart his dangerous gift to other cats? was the first question he had to answer. It was possible, he replied, that he might have initiated his intimate friend the stable puss into his new accomplishment, but it was unlikely that his teaching could have taken a wider range as yet.

"Then," said Mrs. Cornett, "Tobermory may be a valuable cat and a great pet; but I'm sure you'll agree, Adelaide, that

## TOBERMORY

both he and the stable cat must be done away with without delay."

"You don't suppose I've enjoyed the last quarter of an hour, do you?" said Lady Blemley bitterly. "My husband and I are very fond of Tobermory—at least, we were before this horrible accomplishment was infused into him; but now, of course, the only thing is to have him destroyed as soon as possible."

"We can put some strychnine in the scraps he always gets at dinner-time," said Sir Wilfrid, "and I will go and drown the stable cat myself. The coachman will be very sore at losing his pet, but I'll say a very catching form of mange has broken out in both cats and we're afraid of it spreading to the kennels."

"But my great discovery!" expostulated Mr. Appin; "after all my years of research and experiment—"

"You can go and experiment on the short-horns at the farm, who are under proper control," said Mrs. Cornett, "or the elephants at the Zoological Gardens. They're said to be highly intelligent, and they have this recommendation, that they don't come creeping about our bedrooms and under chairs, and so forth."

An archangel ecstatically proclaiming the Millennium, and then finding that it clashed unpardonably with Henley and would have to be indefinitely postponed, could hardly have felt more crestfallen than Cornelius Appin at the reception against him—in fact, had the general voice been consulted on the subject it is probable that a strong minority vote would have been in favour of including him in the strychnine diet.

Defective train arrangements and a nervous desire to see matters brought to a finish prevented an immediate dispersal of the party, but dinner that evening was not a social success. Sir Wilfrid had had rather a trying time with the stable cat and subsequently with the coachman. Agnes Reske ostentatiously limited her repast to a morsel of dry toast, which she bit as though it were a personal enemy; while Mavis Pellington maintained a vindictive silence throughout the meal. Lady Blemley kept up a flow of what she hoped was conversation, but her

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

attention was fixed on the doorway. A plateful of carefully dosed fish scraps was in readiness on the sideboard, but sweets and savoury and dessert went their way, and no Tobermory appeared either in the dining-room or kitchen.

The sepulchral dinner was cheerful compared with the subsequent vigil in the smoking-room. Eating and drinking had at least supplied a distraction and cloak to the prevailing embarrassment. Bridge was out of the question in the general tension of nerves and tempers, and after Odo Finsberry had given a lugubrious rendering of "Melisande in the Wood" to a frigid audience, music was tacitly avoided. At eleven the servants went to bed, announcing that the small window in the pantry had been left open as usual for Tobermory's private use. The guests read steadily through the current batch of magazines, and fell back gradually on the "Badminton Library" and bound volumes of *Punch*. Lady Blemley made periodic visits to the pantry, returning each time with an expression of listless depression which forestalled questioning.

At two o'clock Clovis broke the dominating silence.

"He won't turn up tonight. He's probably in the local newspaper office at the present moment, dictating the first instalment of his reminiscences. Lady What's-her-name's book won't be in it. It will be the event of the day."

Having made this contribution to the general cheerfulness, Clovis went to bed. At long intervals the various members of the house party followed his example.

The servants taking round the early tea made a uniform announcement in reply to a uniform question. Tobermory had not returned.

Breakfast was, if anything, a more unpleasant function than dinner had been, but before its conclusion the situation was relieved. Tobermory's corpse was brought in from the shrubbery, where a gardener had just discovered it. From the bites on his throat and the yellow fur which coated his claws it was evident that he had fallen in unequal combat with the big Tom from the Rectory.

## TOBERMORY

By midday most of the guests had quitted the Towers, and after lunch Lady Blemley had sufficiently recovered her spirits to write an extremely nasty letter to the Rectory about the loss of her valuable pet.

Tobermory had been Appin's one successful pupil, and he was destined to have no successor. A few weeks later an elephant in the Dresden Zoological Garden, which had shown no previous signs of irritability, broke loose and killed an Englishman who had apparently been teasing it. The victim's name was variously reported in the papers as Oppin and Eppelin, but his front name was faithfully rendered Cornelius.

"If he was trying German irregular verbs on the poor beast," said Clovis, "he deserved all he got."

## The Hound\*

WILLIAM FAULKNER

*William Faulkner is a native of Mississippi. After serving with the British Royal Air Force during the War, he became a student at the University of Mississippi. Since then he has written a number of books, both verse and fiction, that have made him a conspicuous figure in American literature of today. His stories are full of a strange violence that shocks some of his readers and enthralls others.*

TO COTTON the shot was the loudest thing he had ever heard in his life. It was too loud to be heard all at once. It continued to build up about the thicket, the dim, faint road, long after the hammerlike blow of the ten-gage shotgun had shocked into his shoulder and long after the spoke of the black powder with which it was charged had dissolved, and after the maddened horse had whirled twice and then turtled galloping, diminishing, the empty stirrups clashing against the empty saddle.

It made too much noise. It was outrageous, unbelievable—a gun which he had owned for twenty years. It stunned him with amazed outrage, seeming to press him down into the thicket, so that when he could make the second shot, it was too late and the hound, too, was gone.

Then he wanted to run. He had expected that. He had coached himself the night before. "Right after it you'll want to run," he told himself. "But you can't run. You got to finish it. You got to clean it up. It will be hard, but you got to do it. You

\* From *Dr. Martino and Other Stories*, by William Faulkner. Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1934. Reprinted by permission of Harrison Smith and Robert Haas.



## THE HOUND

got to set there in the bushes and shut your eyes and count slow until you can make to finish it."

He did that. He laid the gun down and sat where he had lain behind the log. His eyes were closed. He counted slowly, until he had stopped shaking and until the sound of the gun and the echo of the galloping horse had died out of his ears. He had chosen his place well. It was a quiet road, little used, marked not once in three months save by that departed horse; a short cut between the house where the owner, of the horse lived and Varner's store; a quiet, fading, grass-grown trace along the edge of the river bottom, empty save for the two of them, the one squatting in the bushes, the other lying on his face in the road.

Cotton was a bachelor. He lived in a chinked log cabin floored with clay on the edge of the bottom, four miles away. It was dusk when he reached home. In the well-house at the back he drew water and washed his shoes. They were not muddier than usual, and he did not wear them save in severe weather, but he washed them carefully. Then he cleaned the shotgun and washed it too, barrel and stock; why he could not have said, since he had never heard of fingerprints, and immediately afterward he picked up the gun again and carried it into the house and put it away. He kept firewood, a handful of charred pine knots, in the chimney corner. He built a fire on the clay hearth and cooked his supper and ate and went to bed. He slept on a quilt pallet on the floor; he went to bed by barring the door and removing his overalls and lying down. It was dark after the fire burned out; he lay in the darkness. He thought about nothing at all save that he did not expect to sleep. He felt no triumph, vindication, nothing. He just lay there, thinking about nothing at all, even when he began to hear the dog. Usually at night he would hear dogs, single dogs ranging alone in the bottom, or coon- or cat-hunting packs. Having nothing else to do, his life, his heredity, and his heritage centered within a five-mile radius of Varner's store. He knew almost any dog he would

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

hear by its voice, as he knew almost any man he would hear by his voice. He knew this dog's voice. It and the galloping horse with the flapping stirrups and the owner of the horse had been inseparable: where he saw one of them, the other two would not be far away—a lean, rangy brute that charged savagely at any one who approached its master's house, with something of the master's certitude and overbearance; and to-day was not the first time he had tried to kill it, though only now did he know why he had not gone through with it. "I never knowed my own luck," he said to himself, lying on the pallet. "I never knowed. If I had went ahead and killed it, killed the dog . . ."

He was still not triumphant. It was too soon yet to be proud, vindicated. It was too soon. It had to do with death. He did not believe that a man could pick up and move that irrevocable distance at a moment's notice. He had completely forgotten about the body. So he lay with his gaunt, underfed body empty with waiting, thinking of nothing at all, listening to the dog. The cries came at measured intervals, timbrous, sourceless, with the sad, peaceful, abject quality of a single hound in the darkness, when suddenly he found himself sitting bolt upright on the pallet. ✓

"Nigger talk," he said. He had heard (he had never known a negro himself, because of the antipathy, the economic jealousy, between his kind and negroes) how negroes claimed that a dog would howl at the recent grave of its master. "Hit's nigger talk," he said, all the time he was putting on his overalls and his recently cleaned shoes. He opened the door. From the dark river bottom below the hill on which the cabin sat the howling of the dog came, bell-like and mournful. From a nail just inside the door he took down a coiled plowline and descended the slope.

Against the dark wall of the jungle fireflies winked and drifted; from beyond the black wall came the booming and grunting of frogs. When he entered the timber he could not see his own hand. The footing was treacherous with slime and creepers and bramble. They possessed the perversity of inanimate things, seeming to spring out of the darkness and clutch

## THE HOUND

him with spiky tentacles. From the musing impenetrability ahead the voice of the hound came steadily. He followed the sound, muddy again; the air was chill, yet he was sweating. He was quite near the sound. The hound ceased. He plunged forward, his teeth drying under his dry lip, his hands clawed and blind, toward the ceased sound, the faint phosphorescent glare of the dog's eyes. The eyes vanished. He stopped, panting, stooped, the plowline in his hand, looking for the eyes. He cursed the dog, his voice a dry whisper. He could hear silence but nothing else. y:

He crawled on hands and knees, telling where he was by the shape of the trees on the sky. After a time, the brambles raking and slashing at his face, he found a shallow ditch. It was rank with rotted leaves; he waded ankle-deep in the pitch darkness, in something not earth and not water, his elbow crooked before his face. He stumbled upon something, an object with a slack feel. When he touched it, something gave a choked, infantlike cry, and he started back, hearing the creature scuttle away. "Just a possum," he said. "Hit was just a possum."

He wiped his hands on his flanks in order to pick up the shoulders. His flanks were foul with slime. He wiped his hands on his shirt, across his breast, then he picked up the shoulders. He walked backward, dragging it. From time to time he would stop and wipe his hands on his shirt. He stopped beside a tree, a rotting cypress shell, topless, about ten feet tall. He had put the coiled plowline into his bosom. He knotted it about the body and climbed the stump. The top was open, rotted out. He was not a large man, not as large as the body, yet he hauled it up to him hand over hand, bumping and scraping it along the stump, until it lay across the lip like a half-filled meal sack. The knot in the rope had slipped tight. At last he took out his knife and cut the rope and tumbled the body into the hollow stump.

It didn't fall far. He shoved at it, feeling around it with his hands for the obstruction; he tied the rope about the stub of a limb and held the end of it in his hands and stood on the body

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

and began to jump up and down upon it, whereupon it fled suddenly beneath him and left him dangling on the rope.

He tried to climb the rope, rasping off with his knuckles the rotten fiber, a faint, damp powder of decay like snuff in his nostrils. He heard the stub about which the rope was tied crack and felt it begin to give. He leaped upward from nothing, scrabbling at the rotten wood, and got one hand over the edge. The wood crumbled beneath his fingers; he climbed perpetually without an inch of gain, his mouth cracked upon his teeth, his eyes glaring at the sky.

The wood stopped crumbling. He dangled by his hands, breathing. He drew himself up and straddled the edge. He sat there for a while. Then he climbed down and leaned against the hollow trunk.

When he reached his cabin he was tired, spent. He had never been so tired. He stopped at the door. Fireflies still blew along the dark band of timber, and owls hooted and the frogs still boomed and grunted. "I ain't never been so tired," he said, leaning against the house, the wall which he had built log by log. "Like ever' thing had got outen hand. Climbing that stump, and the noise that shot made. Like I had got to be somebody else without knowing it, in a place where noise was louder, climbing harder to climb, without knowing it." He went to bed. He took off the muddy shoes, the overalls, and lay down; it was late then. He could tell by a summer star that came into the square window at two o'clock and after.

Then, as if it had waited for him to get settled and comfortable, the hound began to howl again. Lying in the dark, he heard the first cry come up from the river bottom, mournful, timbrous, profound.

Five men in overalls squatted against the wall of Varner's store. Cotton made the sixth. He sat on the top step, his back against a gnawed post which supported the wooden awning of the veranda. The seventh man sat in the single splint chair; a fat, slow man in denim trousers and a collarless white shirt,

## THE HOUND

smoking a cob pipe. He was past middle-age. He was sheriff of the county. The man about whom they were talking was named Houston.

"He hadn't no reason to run off," one said. "To disappear. To send his horse back home with a empty saddle. He hadn't no reason. Owning his own land, his house. Making a good crop ever year. He was as well-fixed as ere a man in the county. A bachelor too. He hadn't no reason to disappear. You can mark it. He never run. I don't know what; but Houston never run."

"I don't know," a second said. "You can't tell what a man has got in his mind. Houston might a had reason that we don't know, for making it look like something had happened to him. For clearing outen the country and leaving it to look like something had happened to him. It's been done before. Folks before him has had reason to light out for Texas with a changed name."

Cotton sat a little below their eyes, his face lowered beneath his worn, stained, shabby hat. He was whittling at a stick, a piece of pine board.

"But a fellow can't disappear without leaving no trace," a third said. "Can he, Sheriff?"

"Well, I don't know," the Sheriff said. He removed the cob pipe and spat neatly across the porch into the dust. "You can't tell what a man will do when he's pinched. Except it will be something you never thought of. Never counted on. But if you can find just what pinched him you can pretty well tell what he done."

"Houston was smart enough to do ere a thing he taken a notion to," the second said. "If he'd wanted to disappear, I reckon we'd a known about what we know now."

"And what's that?" the third said.

"Nothing," the second said.

"That's a fact," the first said. "Houston was a secret man."

"He wasn't the only secret man around here," a fourth said.

To Cotton it sounded sudden, since the fourth man had said no word before. He sat against the post, his hat slanted forward so that his face was invisible, believing that he could feel their

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

eyes. He watched the sliver peel slow and smooth from the stick, ahead of his worn knife blade. "I got to say something," he told himself.

"He warn't no smarter than nobody else," he said. Then he wished he had not spoken. He could see their feet beneath his hat-brim. He trimmed the stick, watching the knife, the steady sliver. "It's got to trim off smooth," he told himself. "It don't dast to break." He was talking; he could hear his voice: "Swelling around like he was the biggest man in the county. Setting that ere dog on folks' stock." He believed that he could feel their eyes, watching their feet, watching the sliver trim smooth and thin and unhurried beneath the knife blade. Suddenly he thought about the gun, the loud crash, the jarring shock. "Maybe I'll have to kill them all," he said to himself—a mild man in worn overalls, with a gaunt face and lack-luster eyes like a sick man, whittling a stick with a thin hand, thinking about killing them. "Not them: just the words, the talk." But the talk was familiar, the intonation, the gestures; but so was Houston. He had known Houston all his life: that prosperous and overbearing man. "With a dog," Cotton said, watching the knife return and bite into another sliver. "A dog that et better than me. I work, and eat worse than his dog. If I had been his dog, I would not have . . . We're better off without him," he said, blurted. He could feel their eyes, sober, intent.

"He always did rile Ernest," the first said.

"He taken advantage of me," Cotton said, watching the infallible knife. "He taken advantage of ever man he could."

"He was an overbearing man," the Sheriff said.

Cotton believed that they were still watching him, hidden behind their detached voices.

"Smart, though," the third said.

"He wasn't smart enough to win that suit against Ernest over that hog."

"That's so. How much did Ernest get outen that lawing? He ain't never told, has he?"

Cotton believed that they knew how much he had got from

## THE HOUND

the suit. The hog had come into his lot one October. He penned it up; he tried by inquiry to find the owner. But none claimed it until he had wintered it on his corn. In the spring Houston claimed the hog. They went to court. Houston was awarded the hog, though he was assessed a sum for the wintering of it, and one dollar, a pound-fee for a stray. "I reckon that's Ernest's business," the sheriff said, after a time.

Again Cotton heard himself talking, blurting. "It was a dollar," he said, watching his knuckles whiten about the knife handle. "One dollar." He was trying to make his mouth stop talking. "After all I taken offen him. . . ."

"Juries does queer things," the Sheriff said, "in little matters. But in big matters they're mostly right."

Cotton whittled, steady and deliberate. "At first you want to run," he told himself. "But you got to finish it. You got to count a hundred, if it needs, and finish it."

"I heard that dog again last night," the third said.

"You did?" the Sheriff said.

"It ain't been home since the day the horse come in with the saddle empty," the first said.

"It's out hunting, I reckon," the Sheriff said. "It'll come in when it gets hungry."

Cotton trimmed at the stick. He did not move.

"Niggers claim a hound'll howl till a dead body's found," the second said.

"I've heard that," the Sheriff said. After a time a car came up and the Sheriff got into it. The car was driven by a deputy. "We'll be late for supper," the Sheriff said. The car mounted the hill; the sound died away. It was getting toward sundown.

"He ain't much bothered," the third said.

"Why should he be?" the first said. "After all, a man can leave his house and go on a trip without telling everybody."

"Looks like he'd unsaddled that mare, though," the second said. "And there's something the matter with that dog. It ain't been home since, and it ain't treed. I been hearing it ever night. It ain't treed. It's howling. It ain't been home since Tuesday.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

And that was the day Houston rid away from the store here on that mare."

Cotton was the last one to leave the store. It was after dark when he reached home. He ate some cold bread and loaded the shotgun and sat beside the open door until the hound began to howl. Then he descended the hill and entered the bottom.

The dog's voice guided him; after a while it ceased, and he saw its eyes. They were not motionless; in the red glare of the explosion he saw the beast entire in sharp relief. He saw it in the act of leaping into the ensuing welter of darkness; he heard the thud of its body. But he couldn't find it. He looked carefully, quartering back and forth, stopping to listen. But he had seen the shot strike it and hurl it backward, and he turned aside for about a hundred yards in the pitch darkness and came to a slough. He flung the shotgun into it, hearing the sluggish splash, watching the vague water break and recover, until the last ripple fled. He went home and to bed.

He didn't go to sleep though, although he knew he would not hear the dog. "It's dead," he told himself, lying on his quilt pallet in the dark. "I saw the bullets knock it down. I could count the shot. The dog is dead." But still he did not sleep. He did not need to sleep; he did not feel tired or stale in the mornings, though he knew it was not the dog. So he took to spending the nights sitting up in a chair in the door, watching the fireflies and listening to the frogs and the owls.

He entered Varner's store. It was in mid-afternoon; the porch was empty, save for the clerk, whose name was Snopes. "Been looking for you for two-three days," Snopes said. "Come inside."

Cotton entered. The store smelled of cheese and leather and new earth. Snopes went behind the counter and reached from under the counter a shotgun. It was caked with mud. "This is yourn, ain't it?" Snopes said. "Vernon Tull said it was. A nigger squig hunter found it in a slough."



## THE HOUND

Cotton came to the counter and looked at the gun. He did not touch it; he just looked at it. "It ain't mine," he said.

"Ain't nobody around here got one of them old Hadley ten-gages except you," Snopes said. "Tull says it's yourn."

"It ain't none of mine," Cotton said. "I got one like it. But mine's to home."

Snopes lifted the gun. He breeched it. "It had one empty and one load in it," he said. "Who you reckon it belongs to?"

"I don't know," Cotton said. "Mine's to home." He had come to purchase food. He bought it: crackers, cheese, a tin of sardines. It was not dark when he reached home, yet he opened the sardines and ate his supper. When he lay down he did not even remove his overalls. It was as though he waited for something, stayed dressed to move and go at once. He was still waiting for whatever it was when the window turned gray and then yellow and then blue; when, framed by the square window, he saw against the fresh morning a single soaring speck. By sunrise there were three of them, and then seven.

All that day he watched them gather, wheeling and wheeling, drawing their concentric black circles, watching the lower ones wheel down and down and disappear below the trees. He thought it was the dog. "They'll be through by noon," he said. "It wasn't a big dog."

When noon came they had not gone away; there were still more of them, while still the lower ones dropped down and disappeared below the trees. He watched them until dark came, until they went away, flapping singly and sluggishly up from beyond the trees. "I got to eat," he said. "With the work I got to do to-night." He went to the hearth and knelt and took up a pine knot, and he was kneeling, nursing a match into flame, when he heard the hound again; the cry deep, timbrous, unmistakable, and sad. He cooked his supper and ate.

With his axe in his hand he descended through his meager corn patch. The cries of the hound could have guided him, but he did not need it. He had not reached the bottom before he believed that his nose was guiding him. The dog still howled. He

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

paid it no attention, until the beast sensed him and ceased, as it had done before; again he saw its eyes. He paid no attention to them. He went to the hollow cypress trunk and swung his axe into it, the axe sinking helve-deep into the rotten wood. While he was tugging at it something flowed silent and savage out of the darkness behind him and struck him a slashing blow. The axe had just come free; he fell with the axe in his hand, feeling the hot reek of the dog's breath on his face and hearing the click of its teeth as he struck it down with his free hand. It leaped again; he saw its eyes now. He was on his knees, the axe raised in both hands now. He swung it, hitting nothing, feeling nothing; he saw the dog's eyes, crouched. He rushed at the eyes; they vanished. He waited a moment, but heard nothing. He returned to the tree.

At the first stroke of the axe the dog sprang at him again. He was expecting it, so he whirled and struck with the axe at the two eyes and felt the axe strike something and whirl from his hands. He heard the dog whimper, he could hear it crawling away. On his hands and knees he hunted for the axe until he found it.

He began to chop at the base of the stump, stopping between blows to listen. But he heard nothing, saw nothing. Overhead the stars were swinging slowly past; he saw the one that looked into his window at two o'clock. He began to chop steadily at the base of the stump.

The wood was rotten; the axe sank helve-deep at each stroke, as into sand or mud; suddenly Cotton knew that it was not imagination he smelled. He dropped the axe and began to tear at the rotten wood with his hands. The hound was beside him, whimpering; he did not know it was there, not even when it thrust its head into the opening, crowding against him, howling.

"Git away," he said, still without being conscious that it was the dog. He dragged at the body, feeling it slough upon its own bones, as though it were too large for itself; he turned his face away, his teeth glared, his breath furious and outraged and re-

## THE HOUND

strained. He could feel the dog surge against his legs, its head in the orifice, howling.

When the body came free, Cotton went over backward. He lay on his back on the wet ground, looking up at a faint patch of starry sky. "I ain't never been so tired," he said. The dog was howling, with an abject steadiness. "Shut up," Cotton said. "Hush. Hush." The dog didn't hush. "It'll be daylight soon," Cotton said to himself. "I got to get up."

He got up and kicked at the dog. It moved away, but when he stooped and took hold of the legs and began to back away, the dog was there again, moaning to itself. When he would stop to rest, the dog would howl again; he kicked at it. Then it began to be dawn, the trees coming spectral and vast out of the miasmic darkness. He could see the dog plainly. It was gaunt, thin, with a long bloody gash across its face. "I'll have to get shut of you," he said. Watching the dog, he stooped and found a stick. It was rotten, foul with slime. He clutched it. When the hound lifted its muzzle to howl, he struck. The dog whirled; there was a long fresh scar running from shoulder to flank. It leaped at him, without a sound; he struck again. The stick took it fair between the eyes. He picked up the ankles and tried to run.

It was almost light. When he broke through the undergrowth upon the river bank the channel was invisible; a long bank of what looked like cotton batting, though he could hear the water beneath it somewhere. There was a freshness here; the edges of the mist licked into curling tongues. He stooped and lifted the body and hurled it into the bank of mist. At the instant of vanishing he saw it—a sluggish sprawl of three limbs instead of four, and he knew why it had been so hard to free from the stump. "I'll have to make another trip," he said; then he heard a pattering rush behind him. He didn't have time to turn when the hound struck him and knocked him down. It didn't pause. Lying on his back, he saw it in midair like a bird, vanish into the mist with a single short, choking cry.

He got to his feet and ran. He stumbled and caught himself and ran again. It was full light. He could see the stump, and the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

black hole which he had chopped in it; behind him he could hear the swift, soft feet of the dog. As it sprang at him he stumbled and fell and saw it soar over him, its eyes like two cigar-coals; it whirled and leaped at him again before he could rise. He struck at its face with his bare hands and began to run. Together they reached the tree. It leaped at him again, slashing his arms as he ducked into the tree, seeking that member of the body which he did not know was missing until after he had released it into the mist, feeling the dog surging about his legs. Then the dog was gone. Then a voice said:

"We got him. You can come out, Ernest."

The county seat was fourteen miles away. They drove to it in a battered Ford. On the back seat Cotton and the Sheriff sat, their inside wrists locked together by handcuffs. They had to drive for two miles before they reached the highroad. It was hot, ten o'clock in the morning. "You want to swap sides out of the sun?" the Sheriff said.

"I'm all right," Cotton said.

At two o'clock they had a puncture. Cotton and the Sheriff sat under a tree while the driver and the second deputy went across a field and returned with a glass jar of buttermilk and some cold food. They ate, repaired the tire, and went on.

When they were within three or four miles of town, they began to pass wagons and cars going home from market day in town, the wagon teams plodding homeward in their own inescapable dust. The Sheriff greeted them with a single gesture of his fat arm. "Home for supper, anyway," he said. "What's the matter, Ernest? Feeling sick? Here, Joe; pull up a minute."

"I'll hold my head out," Cotton said. "Never mind." The car went on. Cotton thrust his head out the V strut of the top stanchion. The Sheriff shifted his arm, giving him play. "Go on," Cotton said, "I'll be all right." The car went on. Cotton slipped a little farther down in the seat. By moving his head a little he could wedge his throat into the apex of the iron V, the up-rights, gripping his jaws beneath the ears. He shifted again

## THE HOUND

until his head was tight in the vise, then he swung his legs over the door, trying to bring the weight of his body sharply down against his imprisoned neck. He could hear his vertebrae; he felt a kind of rage at his own toughness; he was struggling then against the jerk on the manacle, the hands on him.

Then he was lying on his back beside the road, with water on his face and in his mouth, though he could not swallow. He couldn't speak, trying to curse, cursing in no voice. Then he was in the car again, on the smooth street where children played in the big, shady yards in small, bright garments, and men and women went home toward supper, to plates of food and cups of coffee in the long twilight of summer.

They had a doctor for him in his cell. When the doctor had gone he could smell supper cooking somewhere—ham and hot bread and coffee. He was lying on a cot; the last ray of copper sunlight slid through a narrow window, stippling the bars upon the wall above his head. His cell was near the common room, where the minor prisoners lived, the ones who were in jail for minor offenses or for three meals a day; the stairway from below came up into that room. It was occupied for the time by a group of negroes from the chain-gang that worked the streets, in jail for vagrancy or for selling a little whiskey or shooting craps for ten or fifteen cents. One of the negroes was at the window above the street, yelling down to someone. The others talked among themselves, their voices rich and murmurous, mellow and singsong. Cotton rose and went to the door of his cell and held to the bars, looking at the negroes.

"Hit," he said. His voice made no sound. He put his hand to his throat; he produced a dry croaking sound, at which the negroes ceased talking and looked at him, their eyeballs rolling. "It was all right," Cotton said, "until it started coming to pieces on me. I could a handled that dog." He held his throat, his voice harsh, dry, and croaking. "But it started coming to pieces on me. . . ."

"Who him?" one of the negroes said. They whispered among themselves, watching him, their eyeballs white in the dusk.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"It would a been all right," Cotton said, "but it started coming to pieces. . . ."

"Hush up, white man," one of the negroes said. "Don't you be telling us no truck like that."

"Hit would a been all right," Cotton said, his voice harsh, whispering. Then it failed him again altogether. He held to the bars with one hand, holding his throat with the other, while the negroes watched him, huddled, their eyeballs white and sober. Then with one accord they turned and rushed across the room, toward the staircase; he heard slow steps and then he smelled food, and he clung to the bars, trying to see the stairs. "Are they going to feed them niggers before they feed a white man?" he said, smelling the coffee and the ham.

## Child of God\*

ROARK BRADFORD

*Roark Bradford was born in Tennessee and has spent much of his time in Georgia and Louisiana, where he has been both newspaper reporter and editor. He was Sunday editor of the New Orleans Times-Picayune (1924-6), since which time he has devoted himself to fiction writing. His book, Ol' Man Adam and His Chil-lun, was dramatized to make the famous play, The Green Pastures.*

*Child of God, published in Harper's Magazine in 1927, won the O. Henry award for the best short story of 1928.*

WHEN Willie told the preacher that morning that "ev'rything is all O.K., Revund," he meant it from the bottom of his heart. The hawking of the rain-crow from the limb of the dead cottonwood sounded like the song of a mocking bird. The monotonous patter of rain on the tin roof lulled him into gentle restfulness. The damp, dirty stench that floated up from the dark closeness of the cells below him was like a sedative. Even the lyelike coffee served to remind him that the jailer was his friend.

"Cap'm Archie tole me I could have ev'rything I wanted fer brekfus," he explained as he caught the minister sniffing and eyeing the scant remains of the meal. "An' I tole him I b'lieve I'd take some po'k chops an' cawfee, ef'n hit wuz all right. An' hyar it is."

"You mean dar hit wuz," admonished the preacher. "Now yo' flesh is fed, Willie, whut 'bout yo' soul?"

\* From *Let the Band Play Dixie*. Harper & Brothers, 1934. Reprinted by permission of the author and Harper & Brothers.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Willie beamed a broad, knowing smile. "My soul," he said tolerantly, "is all O.K. An', Revund," he continued, jubilantly, "Cap'm Archie say he gonter bring me a ten-cent cigar to go walkin' up de gallows wid in my mouf." The minister's face was a study in expression. "An' I makes me a speech up yonder"—jerking his arm toward the gallows high in the roof of the jail—"an' den—"

"Den which, son?" Preacher Moore was eager to find a point of contact at which he could begin his prepared message of consolation.

"T'se Glory bound!" Willie declared with enthusiasm.

While the condemned man talked and the preacher listened, the Great State of Louisiana prepared to exact its penalty in the form of the life of Willie Malone because "he did feloniously, wilfully, and of his deliberately premeditated malice aforethought, make an assault on one Thurston Gibbs, and a certain gun which then and there was loaded with gunpowder and buckshot and was by him, the said Willie Malone, had and held in both hands, he, the said Willie Malone, did then and there feloniously and of malice aforethought shoot off and discharge at and upon the said Thurston Gibbs thereby, and by thus striking the said Thurston Gibbs with the buckshots inflicting on and in the body one mortal wound of which said mortal wound the said Thurston Gibbs then and there instantly died. And so the said Willie Malone did in the manner and form aforesaid, feloniously and of deliberately premeditated malice aforethought, kill and murder the said Thurston Gibbs in the Parish of Wilton aforesaid, against the peace and dignity of the Great State of Louisiana."

It all came out at the trial. Hogs had been running in Willie's cornfield. The hogs belonged to Mr. Gibbs. And when Willie asked him to keep them home Mr. Gibbs had cursed him. Willie then bought a shotgun and some buckshot. Everybody agreed upon that much of it. Willie said he aimed to shoot the hogs and that when he heard something rustling the long blades he fired,



## CHILD OF GOD

thinking it was a hog. The district attorney pointed out that it was impossible to get a witness who could say what was in a man's mind and, therefore, he'd leave it to the jury as to whether Willie was hog hunting or man hunting.

The jury was divided upon the point, but all agreed that no nigger had any right to shoot a white man's hogs, anyway, much less shoot a white man. So they found him guilty as charged.

Willie had rather enjoyed his stay in jail. Two or three times his lawyer came and talked to him in a low voice and had him make his cross mark on many important-looking pieces of paper. It all gave him a feeling of importance hitherto not experienced.

He liked "Cap'm Archie," too—Cap'm Archie was always making jokes, and didn't make him do any work around the jail except a little sweeping. And during the long cool spring evenings, when the stars twinkled in the sky and the fiddling of the katydids out in the weed patch back of the jail floated in between the long iron-barred windows, Cap'm Archie would have one of the short-time prisoners drag his chair back to Willie's own private cage and Willie would sing for him.

Willie did like to sing—church songs, mostly. But sometimes when he felt sad and lonesome he'd sing the one that began:

"Thirty days in jail,  
Baby, don't soun' so long,  
But de las' frien' I got in dis worl',  
Done shuck her laig an' gone."

There were many verses, and to these Willie had added a hundred others. He was good at that. When they locked up that Caldonie for cutting her husband because he stole one of her hens and a chicken brood and gave it to another woman, Willie celebrated the occasion by adding:

"He might er stole yo' chickens,  
He might er stole yo' cow,  
Hit don't make no diffunce what he stole,  
You's in de jail-house now."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Cap'm Archie had laughed at that one and it made Willie happy.

Not long after that Cap'm Archie sent for him to come to the office. Cap'm Archie looked sad that day, and it made Willie feel sad. So when Cap'm Archie told him the Supreme Court had turned him down and that he would have to hang Willie was much relieved. †.

"Shuh! Cap'm Archie," Willie consoled, "dat ain' nothin' to go worryin' 'bout. I thought hit mought er been somethin' wrong, de way you had yo' face strung out. Shuh! Ain' dat de same as de judge done tole me?"

That afternoon Reverend Moore, negro preacher, was ushered into Willie's cell, and under his exhortations Willie was converted. He had been converted annually ever since he could remember but he always had been too busy to follow it up. This time he had ample leisure in which to contemplate Christianity and draw mental pictures of it. Willie was keenly interested.

The preacher had spared no detail his imagination could supply as to the glories of heaven, and these Willie supplemented with the colorful pigments of his own imagination. Heaven was a wonderful place. Willie wanted to go there.

"Hyar dey comes, son," the preacher said kindly. "Git up off'n yo' knees."

Cap'm Archie unlocked the cage door with keys that rattled nervously in his hand. Behind the jailer were half a dozen others—the doctor, two brothers of the man he had killed, the editor of the *Wilton Parish Gazette*, and a short, stubby, mean-looking man that Willie disliked instinctively. He had never seen him before, and the pale-green, watery eyes that squinted out at him through shaggy eyelashes made Willie feel bad. "I loves him too," Willie insisted under his breath. "Got ter love him. 'Makes me love ev'ybody—hit's good ernuff fer me'"—Willie recalled the words from the old song. "An' I guess he is somebody. But I be dog ef'n he looks like much, Ole Green Eyes."

"Ready to go, Willie?" It was Cap'm Archie. His voice was kind and filled with sorrow. Willie hated to see Cap'm Archie

## CHILD OF GOD

like that. But when the jailer's teeth clicked together and he said briskly, "Here, slip your hands into these," it did not sound so sad, and Willie obeyed with alacrity.

"I bet you fergits my cigar, Cap'm Archie," Willie countered as his arms were being pinioned behind him.

"Cut out that damned foolishness! Come on here, nigger. I ain't got all day to fool." It was the stubby little man who assumed charge.

"Makes me love ev'ybody," Willie hummed desperately under his breath. "Hit's good ernuff fer me."

"Good ernuff fer anybody," seconded the preacher loudly, happy that he had found some place to enter into the ceremony with the dignity of his calling. "Hit's de ole time religion, and hit's good ernuff fer me!"

As the party marched up the narrow steps to the gallows, the negro prisoners on the lower tier of cells caught up the refrain and the brick walls of the little jail reverberated with:

"Gimme dat ole time religion,  
Gimme dat ole time religion,  
Gimme dat ole time religion, Lawd,  
Hit's good ernuff fer me.

"Hit will take you home to Glory,  
Hit will take you home to Glory,  
Hit will take you home to Glory, Lawd,  
Hit's good ernuff fer me."

The climb to the gallows took a remarkably short time and Willie noticed that as soon as they arrived there "Ole Green Eyes" rushed to the rope that was lying handy and began making a loop in the end of it.

"Makes me love ev'ybody," Willie insisted.

Everybody seemed nervous. Cap'm Archie couldn't look at him. The editor was talking with big words to the elder of the Gibbsses and said something about "dancing on the air." Willie didn't understand it but he knew he wasn't going to dance on any-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

thing. Dancing would send him straight to hell. He had the preacher's word for it.

He edged over toward Cap'm Archie.

"When does I make my speech, Cap'm Archie?" he asked.

The jailer did not look up. "In a minute," he replied. "When you are ready to—when they stand you over there." He pointed to the trapdoor with his foot.

"Come over here, nigger." It was "Ole Green Eyes" again. Willie stood on the trapdoor.

"Makes me love ev'ybody," he kept repeating as the knot was being drawn close to his ear. "Makes me love ev'ybody."

When the knot was finished the little stubby man slipped a black hood over Willie's head and stepped back. A jaybird on a dead limb of the cottonwood broke out in a scathing chatter of malediction at the crow. A dog howled mournfully in the jail yard below. The katydids in the weed patch opened with a wild symphony of fiddling. "Somethin' 'bout to happen," Willie concluded. "I guess I better make my speech."

He threw back his shoulders and raised his chin as though about to address a large congregation.

"Folkses," he began in a clear, strong voice, "I has a few words I wants to say to y'all—"

"Too late now, nigger." It was that stubby little man. And even as the trap gave way under his feet Willie began:

"Makes me love ev'ybody."

Willie did not finish that line, however. He was interrupted in the midst of it by a long blast on a horn. It was a loud, thundering blast and it startled him. He looked into the direction from which it came and there, charging down the road, he saw four prancing horses drawing a snow-white chariot. It was a beautiful sight. He had seen some such rig the time when he went to the circus at Baton Rouge. But this rig was even prettier than the circus carriages. Big white plumes bobbed from the crown-pieces of the bridles, and the horses pranced and danced along, raising a terrible dust.

## CHILD OF GOD

"Great day!" he exclaimed. "Class sho' is comin' down de road to-day."

In a minute the carriage was in front of him and with much suddenness it came to a halt, the horses falling back on their haunches to check the momentum.

"Git up hyar, boy, an' le's git goin'," the driver called down. "Us is late, as it is—or else you is early."

Willie scrambled to the seat beside the driver. As the horses raced onward he enjoyed the thrill of the speedy ride, the wind rushing by his ears, the sparkle of the gold and silver harness, the dexterity with which the driver held the horses in the road with one hand and cracked the whip over their heads with the other.

"You drives right well, boy," he observed. "What's yo' name?"

"Jehu," replied the driver.

"Jehu-which?"

"Jest Jehu," replied the driver.

"Who dat boy wid de hawn in his han'?"

"Gab'l."

The monosyllabic replies of his companion irritated Willie. He wanted conversation and he intended to have it.

"How long you been—" he began, but suddenly Gabriel raised his trumpet to his lips and blew a deafening blast which almost lifted Willie from his seat.

"Hol' tight," cautioned Jehu, and the chariot stopped suddenly.

Willie saw an old man in a black slouch hat and cutaway coat, walking very alertly toward the carriage. His face was cleanly shaven except for a mustache and goatee which gave him a distinguished appearance. Willie instinctively knew that this quality-gentleman was going to ride on the plush seats inside so he leaped down and opened the door of the carriage. The old man halted a few paces from him and cast a surveying glance at the horses.

"That checkrein is too tight on that off-lead horse," he said. "It is a pity that I have to tend to these trifles, but damn it all,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

I can't stand to see fine horseflesh suffer on account of triflin' niggers."

Willie quickly ran and lowered the checkrein and climbed back to his seat.

"You oughter know better'n to check up dat hoss so high," he admonished Jehu with a proprietary air. "Us likes our hosses to have a heap er room."

Jehu did not reply. He held steadily to the reins, and the carriage fairly flew through the misty haze. Willie wanted to ask for the reins himself. He felt he could drive much more to his own satisfaction but, withal, he admitted, Jehu was doing very well. A minute later, however, when the lead horse bolted just as they approached a long bridge, and Jehu prevented a crash by expert maneuvering of the reins, Willie was glad he was not driving.

"Does dat ev'y time at the bridge," Jehu volunteered as the team settled down to a long gallop across the structure. "Lots er times us misses an' de folks in de chariot gits drowned tryin' to cross Jurdan."

"Dat de Jurdan, huh?" asked Willie. "I be dog," and he gripped tightly to the seat.

The chariot rolled off the bridge and up to the front of a white pearly gate where it stopped. Willie dropped confidently to the ground, opened the chariot door, and assisted the distinguished old passenger to alight. St. Peter swung the big gate open.

"Welcome, Colonel," he said, "it gives me great pleasure to greet you personally after having known you indirectly for these many years. She's waiting for you under the crepe myrtles. Cherub, escort the Colonel to Miss Julia."

Willie thought that was great and he was thrilled almost to ecstasy when the old gentleman gave him a curt nod in recognition of his service.

As soon as the old man had disappeared behind the cherub St. Peter dropped his air of formality.

"Well, well," he said, "if it ain't that worthless Willie Malone. Willie, how'd you git here, son?"

## CHILD OF GOD

That was language Willie could understand and appreciate.

"St. Peter," he replied, "I jes' got on de chariot an' rid up hyar."

"Well," said St. Peter, "I guess you better try on a pair of wings, then. Here, Cherub. Bring out a pair of wings for old Willie Malone."

St. Peter helped the cherub adjust the wings.

"Now you're fixed, son," he announced. "Fly away!"

And Willie flew. He flew among the golden clouds and down long narrow golden streets. He flew over mansions of gold and sparkling rivers. High into the air and close to the ground he flew. He tried a few fancy turns, such as he had seen birds perform among the chinaberry trees. He dived at the surface of the water and grabbed at the golden fish and then climbed again by lusty flaps of his wings, as pelicans do. And he did it perfectly.

"Doggone my hide," he exclaimed, "dis is somethin' like!"

After a few hours the novelty began to wear off. He was high in the air, maybe a mile high, he estimated. So he pointed one wing at an angle and began gliding down, making a huge spiral as he descended. Half-way down, he reversed the cant of his wings and came down the rest of the way, flying backwards.

He landed right in the midst of a group of other angels who were seated around the Great Throne. Upon the throne, sat the Great Lord God. Willie recognized him instantly because of the distinction with which he sat upon his throne and by the care-free tilt of his huge, bejeweled crown almost hiding one eye and by the angle at which the ten-cent cigar was cocked. Willie was a little frightened and dazzled by the regal splendor of it all, but he settled down noiselessly to the ground, and was made to feel perfectly at home by the informal greeting he received.

"I bet you want to hear some music, don't you, Willie?" asked the Great Lord God and, without waiting for Willie's reply, he continued, "Little David, play on your harp."

"What shall I play, Great Lord God?" asked Little David.

"Play something calm and low, Little David," said the Great Lord God. "Do not alarm my people." ✓

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

David struck a chord or two on his harp. It was beautiful. The mellow music floated straight to Willie's heart. One or two of the other angels started humming with the music and, almost unconscious of where he was, Willie added his low, rich bass to the chorus:

"When dat big *Titanic* sunk down in de sea,  
All de brass bands played 'Nearer My God to Thee.'  
Out on de deep blue ocean de people sleep  
In a cold wet cradle, three miles deep.  
It's yo' las' trip, *Titanic*."

After several verses Willie began to feel a personal sorrow for the passengers of the *Titanic*. The music stopped suddenly, and the Great Lord God commanded, "Little David, play something quick and lively. Let the skies rock with mirth. Let the heavens open wide. Let the stars and the moon shine out. Let my people shout with joy."

And as soon as the command was issued all the angels began dancing and singing as Little David played:

"Two little babies a-layin' in de bed,  
One of'm sick an' de yuther mos' dead.  
Sont fer de doctor an' de doctor said,  
'Give dem babies some shortnin' bread.'  
So put on de skillet an' thow way de led,  
Cause mammy gonter make a little shortnin' bread."

Several more songs followed and finally Willie began to tire of singing. The party broke up, the angels flying away in groups of twos and threes. Soon no one was left before the throne except Willie.

Willie felt slightly embarrassed there, with no one around except the Great Lord God. He figured he might be intruding or something, or that perhaps he'd better go out and fly some more. But as he was turning over the idea a tall, kindly looking angel, more strikingly handsome than any he had ever seen, scrolled up and sat down familiarly by the side of the Great



## CHILD OF GOD

Lord God. At first Willie thought it was Cap'm Archie. There was kindness and understanding in his face, just like Cap'm Archie's face. But it wasn't Cap'm Archie. Cap'm Archie had no scars on his hands and feet as had this angel.

As he puzzled over the matter he faintly remembered a story his old mammy had told him about a man with scars on his hands and feet, and he recalled the lines of a song that Cap'm Archie used to make him sing:

"They nailed His hands and they rivet His feet,"  
An' de hammers wuz heard in Jerusalem street."

Some way, Willie could not place him. But he felt much more at ease for his presence.

"What you thinking about, Willie?" the kindly angel asked. "You don't seem to be enjoying yourself so much."

Willie did not know exactly what to reply. He rummaged through his mind hastily. He had been entirely happy for ever so long, not a thing had gone wrong. Everybody had been so nice to him. The music had been beautiful and just the songs he liked to sing. His wings fitted perfectly and St. Peter had been wonderful. So had Jehu. And Cap'm Archie—he had given him everything he could think of and a heap he did not think of. Of course there was the matter of the cigar. He wanted to go to the gallows with a cigar in his mouth. But that wasn't Cap'm Archie's fault . . . and, too, maybe Cap'm Archie had forgotten the cigar. He had so many things to think about. Willie concluded that if it were the cigar he would say nothing about it to the kind angel because he did not want to embarrass Cap'm Archie. He did not really want to go to the gallows with a cigar, anyway, he decided.

"But I did want ter make dat speech," he concluded.

"What speech is that?" asked the kindly faced angel.

Willie explained in great detail, and the angel and the Great Lord God listened intently.

"But hit wa'n't Cap'm Archie's fault," he declared.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Whose fault was it, then?" demanded the Great Lord God. "Hit mought er been—onderstan', I ain' s'cusin' nobody," Willie faltered, "but hit mought er been Ole Green Eyes. But I loves ev'ybody—him, too," he added hastily.

"I know the scoundrel," declared the Great Lord God. "He's been plaguing me for years and years. But this is too much." The brow of the Great Lord God clouded in anger and he shouted with a terrible roar, like seven peals of thunder, "Cherub, bring me a bolt of forked lightning that I may strike that man from the face of the earth."

The cherub brought the lightning, and the Great Lord God was about to hurl it. But the kind angel touched his arm gently.

"I wouldn't, Father," said the angel. "He might not have understood that the speech was to have been the biggest thing in Willie's life."

The Great Lord God stayed his hand and turned upon the kind angel. "Of course he understood. That's why he didn't let him make it. He's just low down mean. I've put up with enough of it."

"But," insisted the kind angel, "it will do no good to strike him down with lightning. It would frighten many people. And it would start new arguments over religion and that would lead to controversies and they would lead to hatreds and hatreds lead to—"

"I've heard that speech a million times, Son," said the Great Lord God, "and you needn't go into details. I admit you are right," and he handed the lightning bolt back to the cherub. "But," continued the Great Lord God, "I will not let this thing pass." His brow clouded in anger again. "I am the Great I Am," he roared, "and my commands shall be obeyed." The kind angel sat meekly and argued no further.

"Willie Malone," commanded the Great Lord God in a tone of thunder.

"Yassuh, Great Lord God," replied Willie, jumping to his feet.

"You go right back down yonder and make that speech. He's

## CHILD OF GOD

sitting in the jail office right now with Captain Archie. Now go and do my commands."

Willie lost no time in getting to the jail. As he approached, he noticed a half dozen negroes—friends of his—standing in the rain about the big steel door entry to the lower cells. But he hurried by them with only a curt "hy-dy, boys." The fact that they ignored him stung a little but he had no time to lose. He went straight to the office entrance.

The green-eyed man was seated at a table fingering five new ten-dollar bills. The coroner was scratching away with a pen on a big official-looking document. The editor and the two Gibbises were talking in low tones. Cap'm Archie was hunched down in his chair at his desk, looking at the floor. Willie stood a minute respectfully, hoping Cap'm Archie would notice him and inquire what he wanted.

But Cap'm Archie did not look toward him and Willie tried a scheme that had worked many times for him.

"Cap'm, suh," he said, "don' you want dis ole dirty flo' swep' up er somethin'?"

But Cap'm Archie acted as though he did not hear.

Willie cogitated. Maybe he was worrying about forgetting the cigar.

But as the thought came to Willie Cap'm Archie slowly reached to his vest pocket and drew out a single long black cigar and studied it intently.

"You got the mate to that'n, Sheriff?" Ole Green Eyes quit shuffling the new bills and directed his attention toward the cigar.

"Nope," replied Cap'm Archie, "I ain't got the mate to this'n." And he tightened his grip on the cigar until he had broken and crushed it. "And if I did have it," he added, "I'd damn well keep it."

"No hard feelings, Sheriff," offered Green Eyes. "I see you ain't used to it. Cheer up. It's just another nigger less."

A scraping of feet in the jail hall at the side of the office at-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

tracted the attention of both Cap'm Archie and Green Eyes. Willie followed their gaze through the barred hall door and saw six negroes carrying a long black box toward the big jail door. Behind the box marched Preacher Moore, directing and exhorting as he went.

"There he goes now—out of yer jail and out of yer life. It's all over and yer duty's done."

Cap'm Archie squeezed the cigar tightly, crumbling it into tiny bits.

The green-eyed man essayed a cackling laugh. "And so's mine," he continued, picking up the five bills, "so I guess I'll be going."

Willie had been standing by in respectful silence since the white folks had indicated by ignoring him that they were too busy to talk to him. White people are that way, Willie had learned. Sometimes they will talk with you and laugh with you. And sometimes when they are busy they won't pay any attention to you unless you get in their way or something. Then they will curse you. Willie knew how to get along with white folks.

But things were different now. He had business with Mister Green Eyes.

"Wait a minute, Cap'm, suh," he addressed the green-eyed man.

Green Eyes stiffened, blinked his eyes, passed his hand across his forehead, and frowned. He stuck the money into his pocket quickly and grabbed for his hat.

"Wait a minute, Cap'm," Willie pleaded. "I got ter make my speech."

The green-eyed man turned pale and shut his eyes tightly, gritting his teeth and shaking his head as if in an effort to clear his brain.

"Sheriff," he said with a great struggle for calmness in his voice, "I need'a drink. I—I—I'm sort of nervous, I reckon."

"There's the doctor," Cap'm Archie replied calmly, nodding toward the coroner.

"But, Cap'm, suh, wait," interjected Willie, "lemme make my speech—"

## CHILD OF GOD

The green-eyed man yelled and ran to the doctor.

"Get me a drink, Doctor!" he begged. "A drink! For God's sake. I'm all shot to hell, Doctor. Get me a drink, quick."

"What's the matter, man?" demanded the doctor. "What is it?"

"That damned nigger, Doctor. I'm seein' things. So help me. He wants to make a speech, Doctor—"

"Dat's all right, Cap'm," Willie insisted. "Hit ain't no mean speech."

"O-ww-w-w—Doctor," screamed the green-eyed man. "There he is again."

The coroner and Cap'm Archie caught the hangman and led him to a chair.

"Calm down, man," said the doctor. "Your nerves are upset."

"But that nigger, that damned nigger! I seen him."

"Well, he isn't going to hurt you, man. He's—"

"Nawsuh, I wan't gonter hurt nobody," Willie assured him. "I jes' was gonter say a few words."

The man struggled wildly, and it was only with the added strength of the two Gibbsses and the editor that they succeeded in holding him in his chair. He was alternately crying and cursing, trembling weakly and fighting wildly.

"That damned nigger! I see him! I see him!" he kept shouting. "He wants to make a speech!"

"Hold him until I can fix a hypodermic," ordered the doctor.

"I jes' gonter make my speech," Willie pleaded again in an effort to calm the green-eyed man. "I ain' gonter do nothin' but jes' tawk."

But instead of being soothed, the man became more violent and but for the utmost strength of four men, he would have escaped. They held him, though. Held him in the chair while his eyes glared in wild frenzy, his huge neck swelled even bigger, his face turned purple, and his breath came in short gasping gasps. "Git away, damned nigger. I see you. Ow-ww-ww!"

"I jes' on'y got a few words I wanner say," Willie began again. And after one lunge at the sound of Willie's voice the man

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

quieted down and his eyes stared glassily at nothing, although his neck still bulged. The color of his face changed to an ugly blue and his mouth dropped open and dripped frothy saliva. And while the green-eyed man sat limp in the chair Willie Malone completed his speech:

"I jes' wanner say I ain' got no hard feelin's agin nobody an' I don' want nobody to has no hard feelin's agin me. An' I wants to meet you all in heaven."

## Salesmanship\*

MARY ELLEN CHASE

*Mary Ellen Chase is professor of English in Smith College. She is a native of Maine, and two colleges of her native state, both the University of Maine and Bowdoin College, have honored her with a Litt.D. She is the author of various volumes, critical, juvenile and fiction. Her essays, articles, reviews and stories have appeared in many magazines and her latest book, Mary Peters, is considered by critics to be one of the best of recent American novels.*

M<sup>R.</sup> HENRY STAPLES felt a new spring in his knees as he descended the apartment-house steps and started downtown. Something of the sprightliness of his dreams the preceding night seemed to have gotten into his feet as well as into his mind. Funny how things worked out, he told himself, if you just gave yourself a chance. And fifteen dollars was little enough to pay for such a chance as he had given himself.

To be sure, the full prophecy of his new course on salesmanship had yet to be realized. He had still to be called within the glass doors of the manager's office, to be met with a firm hand-clasp and the genial proffer of a doubled salary. But with his Saturday's advance from boys' underwear and stockings to suits, things were well on their way.

He took a new and delighted interest in the sounds that issued from nearly every opened window. In their tight little living-room Nora was at last listening to the morning's radio talk on housekeeping hints and recipes for the day. Extremely satis-

\* Reprinted by permission of Mary Ellen Chase. Published in *The Pictorial Review*, July, 1930.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

fying to him was the knowledge that she might enjoy this outward and visible sign of his new discovery of powers latent within himself!

He smiled as he recalled Charley's hurried and unwilling exit to school, his earlier participation with his father in the morning exercises which were to make them both "more manly, more fit for this game of living and of life."

Once in the store, his benevolence diffused itself among his fellow employees. He beamed upon floor-walkers, floor-polishers, and stenographers. He commented on the weather to Mr. Nesbit, still in the underwear; to Mr. Sims, who had sold belts and suspenders for years. It seemed impossible, now that he was so gloriously ready, to wait for his first customers.

These he saw before the white coverings were fully removed from the counters, and with that peculiar divination which his course had promised, he marked them as his own. They stood within the entrance-doors waiting for nine o'clock. There was a difference in their attitudes which Mr. Staples, now that such telling things had been called to his attention, noted at once.

The woman, small and inconspicuously dressed, stood close to the window, staring with a rapt expression upon the boys' apparel displayed there, summer things—blazers, flannels, gay shirts—interspersed with the tennis-rackets and golf-sticks. The man stood near the outer doorway, his hands in his pockets, and stared, sulkily, Mr. Staples declared to himself, into the street.

Obviously the woman was to be the purchaser, a conclusion immensely reassuring to Mr. Staples, since from the careful analysis of temperament provided by his course the truth had been borne in upon him that he had been expressly fashioned to deal with women rather than with men.

He was not at all surprised when five minutes later they came down the aisle, the man several paces behind.

And Mr. Staples' cordiality knew no reserves. He gave it full swing, partly because he *felt* cordial, partly because he sensed an air of determination in the somewhat set face of his customer, a



## SALESMANSHIP

determination which he must combat with all the forces of persuasion and gallantry at his command.

"In selling there is no asset like extreme politeness," he quoted to himself. "Keep your reservoir filled to the brim."

Seemingly unimpressed by his welcome, the woman came to the point at once.

"I am looking for a blue suit—for a boy—twelve years old."

"Certainly," said Mr. Staples. "Our stock, I may say, is excellent. Were you thinking of serge or cheviot?"

"I hadn't thought very much of—the material."

"I see. It's color you want. But material's important; take my word for that. There's a lot to be said for both. Serge may be dressier, but cheviot won't take a shine or show spots like serge. And it's newer. It's sure to be worn by boys and men for two seasons straight."

"I see," said the woman.

Mr. Staples felt vaguely troubled as he turned toward the cases. He always liked interest in his customers. It made things go better even if they were fussy and hard to suit. He groped about in his mind for something to liven things up a bit.

"You said twelve years old? Now, that's an age to keep you guessing, isn't it? I've a boy twelve myself. They're alive to everything at twelve."

The woman did not answer. Mr. Staples did not resent her neglect to his allusion to Charley, but he had thought his last remark original. Queer how some folks expect the salesman to do it all, and yet he had been forewarned by his course of just such an attitude. Undaunted, he started on another and more direct course.

"How big a boy is he? Large for his age or small?"

"I think you'd say average," said the woman.

"It's always more satisfactory," said Mr. Staples, "to bring them along. But, of course, there's school."

"Yes," replied the woman.

Funny, thought Mr. Staples, as he spread out four suits for her inspection, funny how little help her husband offered. He

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

stood at the extreme end of the counter, fumbling with the buckles and straps of some knickers piled there. Perhaps he was a professor from the college on the hill. They always behaved in that absent-minded fashion, their heads deep in some crazy notion or another.

"You wouldn't want me to lay these aside now, and bring him in, say, at four to try them on?"

"No," she said. "I think not. I'll choose myself."

"I know just how 'tis," remarked Mr. Staples genially. "Try to catch a twelve-year-old after school and there's something doing. Funny how when they get older—"

"This looks about right to me," interrupted the woman, "this cheviot one."

"You can't go wrong on that," assured Mr. Staples, "no matter what. That's genuine Scotch cheviot, all wool to a thread. My word on it, Madam, and the store's guaranty. That suit'll wear the toughest youngster in this town a good two years—one year for Sunday-school and the like of that, and one for common. And being cheviot, it's not going to show every spot on earth or take the shine that serge is bound to."

He lifted the suit from the counter, hoping thereby to attract the attention of the man; but he still fumbled at the buckles and straps. The woman fingered the cloth, and then with a sudden, impulsive gesture put her hand in one of the pockets of the coat.

Mr. Staples laughed aloud.

"I see," he said knowingly. "A boy does always raise Ned with pockets. But these are tough ones and lined with the best. He won't sag these, no matter what he fills them with!"

For a long time, it seemed to Mr. Staples, she kept her hand in that pocket. He began to feel foolish standing there holding the suit up in one hand.

"It's good and roomy, too," he said at last, a little loudly so that she withdrew her hand. "But there's one drawback. There's only one pair of pants to this suit. Most have knickers and longs, but this has only the longs. Most of the kids now,

## SALESMANSHIP

though, wear longs. You see in a sort of dressy suit like this they don't—"

He stopped, surprised at the sudden movement of the man, who walked quickly from the knickers toward the door. But he paused after a moment and, to Mr. Staples' relief, came nearer his wife. She put her arm in his and drew him closer.

"I believe," she said to Mr. Staples, and as she raised her eyes he was surprised again by the brightness of them, "I believe I'll take this very suit. He's always wanted long trousers, but I've thought them rather silly for small boys."

"They're all the rage, Madam," said Mr. Staples, relieved alike by her decision and by her increased interest, though withal puzzled a bit in that she did not seem to be speaking to him at all. "And once he wears them through, you can just combine the coat with sports knickers or flannels, and presto! he's fixed as good as new."

He was not prepared for the silence which greeted his words. A customer might at least acquiesce, he thought, in such an economical suggestion. For just a fraction of a minute he envied men of lesser state, Mr. Nesbit in the underwear and Mr. Sims in belts and suspenders, the sale of whose wares required less tact.

"Successful salesmen," he quoted to himself, "learn to create the atmosphere in which their customers move."

Vaguely conscious that he was, that he himself was moving, however blindly, in an atmosphere not of his own creating, he strove to readjust himself, to be "master of the situation."

"He'll be some surprised this noon when he comes home and finds his longs," he said with what his book would have termed an attractive chuckle.

"We're in somewhat of a hurry," said the man brusly, startling Mr. Staples by the first and unexpected sound of his voice. "If you'll do the suit up, please."

"Certainly."

Again he made an attempt at livening matters, at disseminating that quality called "homelike," by his course-book.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Well, we sure must trust each other. Here, I entirely forgot to tell you the price or you to ask!"

"It doesn't matter," said the man, taking out his purse.

"Cash or charge?" asked Mr. Staples, seemingly unconscious of the pocketbook.

"I'll pay for it," said the man.

Mr. Staples consulted the price-tag.

"Twenty-nine fifty," he announced. "And I know that seems a bit steep for a growing boy. But I'll guarantee your money's worth, and if he outgrows it quick, send him in. Alteration's free. And here's my card."

From an inner pocket he secured and extended a bit of new, fresh pasteboard. The man ignored it, but the woman took it.

"Thank you," she said, and smiled suddenly at him, a strange smile which Mr. Staples was at a loss to interpret. "You've been very kind, I'm sure."

"Not at all," said Mr. Staples, now secure in her thanks and in the consciousness of a good sale. "Not at all. We aim to please. I'll tell you what, Madam. With a sale like this we like to throw in a bit of a gift. This Spring it's a baseball, a good league number, none of your twine-and-sawdust balls. If you'll just show your slip in the sports and my card they'll give you one. Present it to the young man with my compliments."

He felt magnanimous as he began to secure the box with stout twine and wrap it in brown paper.

For a moment only the crackling of the paper broke the silence.

"We're late, Margaret," said the man then, his voice high and tense, his hand pulling at her arm. "Come, darling."

Mr. Staples stared. The word of endearment seemed to him so at variance with the tone and gesture. Little as he was given to calling Nora such loving names, he rarely spoke to her in that tone or treated her to such roughness.

Perhaps the woman had not heard his offer of the baseball. He started to repeat it, and then decided not to. If these queer

## SALESMANSHIP

customers did not want something for nothing—why, the store was the gainer.

He looked after them as they walked hurriedly arm in arm toward the door. It had been a good enough sale, but a queer one, one hard to dominate by his own personality.

Then he suddenly recalled an omission which must be rectified, and he hurried after them, book in hand. As he reached them the man was speaking, still in a tense, almost angry voice.

"I told you, Margaret, 'twas crazy to do it yourself."

"Don't worry, dear," said the woman. "I wanted to. And I'm pleased about the long trousers. He's always wanted them."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Staples to her as he intercepted them at the door. "Even with cash sales like this the store asks for names and addresses so we can keep track of our patrons. I hope I may have the pleasure of fitting out that youngster again."

He colored a bit under the resentful gaze of the man, but recovered himself when the woman smiled again at him. The course-book was right. His temperament was made for dealing with women.

"Of course," she said, laying her hand upon her husband's arm quite as though she were curbing a restless child. "Mr. and Mrs. Charles Seymour, 100 Forest Avenue. And thank you again."

That evening Mr. Staples stretched out luxuriously upon the green davenport with his paper under the bridge-lamp. He had had a good day, had earned his relaxation.

Charley was fussing with the dial of the radio. Nora was washing the dishes in the kitchenette. Mr. Staples was a thorough reader of his paper. Immersed in the sports, in the society columns, where he often found the names of his patrons, he was oblivious to Charley's impatience.

"Say, Dad, I wish you'd help a fellow. I keep gettin' this correct English stuff when I want baseball. Don't I get enough English in school? I'll say I do!"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Henry!" called Nora from the sink. "Henry! What's the use of the new radio if you can't help Charley get what he wants?"

But Mr. Staples's eyes were all at once concentrated on one spot, in the last column, on the next to the last page.

SEYMOUR—On Sunday, Charles, aged twelve, only son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Seymour, 100 Forest Avenue. Funeral Tuesday at two o'clock.

"Dad," called Charley again. "This thing's funny. I can't do nothin' with it."

"Henry!" supplemented Nora, appearing now from the kitchenette and snatching the paper from his hands. "My word! You're reading even the deaths. Don't you hear Charley?"

"Yes," said Mr. Staples.

He got up from the davenport and began fussing with the dial of the radio. Queer, he thought, how you couldn't tell some folks some things even after you'd lived years with them. Funny!

"You don't seem to be doing much better, Dad," complained Charley. "It's funny how we can't get what we want, ain't it?"

"Yes, Charley," said Mr. Staples, passing his left hand in a dazed fashion across his forehead.

He glanced about the room, at its tight security, at the fat pink sofa-cushions, at Nora in her beflowered rubber apron, at Charley in his blue suit, at his course-book on the center-table, awaiting his half-hour of study.

"Yes," he repeated, neither to Nora nor to Charley, "yes, 'tis funny. Most things are kind of—funny, I guess."

## Jobs in the Sky\*

TESS SLESINGER

*Tess Slesinger, a recent graduate of the School of Journalism at Columbia University, is winning recognition as one of the gifted young writers of New York today. Her stories appear in both the literary and the popular magazines. Her recent novel, The Unpossessed, has been popular.*

IT MEANT that you wanted to hold your job like nobody's business if you managed to get in ahead of Mr. Keasbey, whose name had been first in Mrs. Summers's section-book and the section-books of her predecessors for a noble fifteen years. Mr. Keasbey signed in daily at eight-forty (ten minutes before the deadline), and on the dot of eight-fifteen on pep-speech days (a good ten minutes before Mrs. Summers reluctantly counted you late)—and daily after removing the cover from his table of Important New Fiction and flicking his books with his private duster, stood with his fine white head bowed, waiting reproachfully like the best boy in the class. But on the day before Christmas, the Monday which was the last day of the Christmas rush, 1934, and the morning for which Mr. Marvell's Christmas speech had been announced (Mr. Marvell being the "M" in "M. & J."), Joey Andrews, No. 191-23, 167B, who had been till three weeks before without a number, in the army of the unemployed, wrote his name and number on the top line of Mrs. Summers's fresh page at exactly eight-eleven. Mrs. Summers asked Mr. Andrews if he had fallen out of bed; she said it

\*From *Scribner's Magazine*, March, 1935. Reprinted by permission of the author and *Scribner's Magazine*. This story will also appear in a volume of her stories *Time: The Present* to be published this spring by Simon & Schuster, Inc.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

was nice to see some face beside Mr. Keasbey's so early in the morning; and she said she had sat up in the bathroom all night (not to wake *Mister S.*) going over her records and trying to make them tally. . . . And Mrs. Summers, who limped before nine and immediately after five-thirty because there was not, she said, very much sitting on her job, limped off with the sales-books for the hat-girls who were also part of her section.

Once more as Joey Andrews looked down from the mezzanine onto the great sleeping main floor below, he felt in his stomach the dull ball of fear which a lover experiences when he recalls how nearly he missed going out on that particular Tuesday on which he met his love. But propping the biography of Dostoevsky against the memoirs of a Grand Duchess on his own table of History and Biography, Joey Andrews felt that any recollection of his eight-months' nightmare among the unhired was unworthy of No. 191-23, 167B of a great department store. And wondering to what table *Jane Eyre* belonged (for surely it was not a biography?), "I must forget about the Washington Square gang," he scolded himself, "I don't belong with them any more"; and went to lay *Jane Eyre* tentatively on Miss Bodkin's table of Classics.

Downstairs the perfume girls were drifting in; the floor-walkers, adjusting their buttonholes and their smiles, moved here and there with dignity. Having arranged his own table, Joey Andrews looked about his beloved book department for some way to be helpful, some way to live up to the Christmas spirit of M. & J. He didn't quite dare to fix Miss Bodkin's table; and he was just pulling the long white nightgown off Mr. Keasbey's New Fiction when Mr. Keasbey himself walked in—it was the dot of eight-fifteen—and, forewarned by the section-book violated, bearing another's name before his own, gave Joey a haughty, suspicious look and began flying around his table making kissing sounds until his fingers came safely to rest on the handle of his very own duster.

Now the cosmetic girls were mounting stacks of cold cream on their counters while near the doors the cheap stockings



## JOBS IN THE SKY

stretched coyly over amputated limbs. On the mezzanine behind the book department the hat-girls in their drab black dresses and exquisitely sheer-hosed legs began clapping the hats on stalks like flowers. Mrs. Ryder, who kept the lending library at the back, came next; the hierarchy permitted Mrs. Ryder and Mr. Keasbey to bow with formal recognition of mutual virtue—Mrs. Ryder had been with M. & J. a noble twelve years to Mr. Keasbey's noble fifteen—before Mr. Keasbey, hurried to return *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, which he borrowed every night that it had not been taken by a customer, for his mother who was eighty and had stopped sleeping. Mrs. Ryder began driving the hair-pins into the pretzel high on her head, and when Mr. Keasbey laid *Rebecca* on the table before her, pointed her mouth like a pencil and made a check-mark with her head: down—one, two; hold; up—one, two—and Mrs. Ryder and Mr. Keasbey part for the day.

Miss Paley of the Modern Library and movie-editions, to whom the hierarchy does not permit Mr. Keasbey to bow, mounts the mezzanine stairs with a look of resigned bewilderment on her melancholy face. Two decades of teaching school have left her permanently surprised at finding herself daily entering the commercial world (and how had she ever, in the teeth of Mr. Neely's, the Principal's, disapproval, made the change!)—and also there have been rumors breathed by Miss Bodkin that Miss Paley's life in the commercial world is to be very brief indeed, and it may be that some of these rumors have even reached Miss Paley. Yet here she is, daily from nine to five-thirty, not selling children's books, as surely, she complains to Joey Andrews who rushes forth to help her with her jungle of cheap editions, as surely she had, after two decades of teaching little children, every reason to expect? Had she not, as Mr. Neely (who put things so well!) had put it, a gift for understanding children? But, Mr. Neely warned me, she whispers through her closed white mask, that the commercial world was something else again . . . and drawing out the handkerchief (given her by the best-speller's mother) from her place in the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Modern Library copy of *The Old Wives' Tale* which she reads at idle moments in the day, Miss Paley dismisses Joey with a kindly, authoritative nod as though he were the first-grade pupil who had just collected the rulers. And Joey, rather glad to get away, for, ever since Miss Bodkin breathed the rumor, Miss Paley has been touched for him with some infectious germ, takes up his stand by his table of History and Biography.

Miss Willows, the buyer, trips over to her desk and lays her hat in the bottom drawer. But no Miss Bodkin. Miss Willows bites at her pearls as she makes a hasty survey of the book department, arranges Christmas calendars with her head on one side like a bird. Still no Miss Bodkin (Joey Andrews hates to think of no Miss Bodkin). "Heavens knows," murmurs Miss Paley to Mrs. Summers on the subject of varicose veins in which they both specialize, as Miss Bodkin's chum Miss Rees slips in on the stroke of eighty-twenty the deadline, and carelessly pulls the cover off *The Young Girls Series* for which Miss Paley would cheerfully trade her whole leather-bound set of Proust; and "*I know as well as Heaven,*" returns Mrs. Summers humorously, and she has forty minutes more of the luxury of limping. Beautiful Miss Fern Stacy who is so dumb (according to Miss Bodkin) that she can hardly make change, takes her place behind the stationery counter—Mr. Keasbey had fought bitterly against its ignoble presence in the book department, even for the Christmas rush week. Mr. Keasbey stands with his arms folded, his head lifted; a fit citizen in the world of M. & J., fit door-man to the gate of Heaven: perhaps one day Mr. Marvel will pause and glance at his noble mien, his professorial posture, and will think to himself, What a man! what a faithful employee. . . . And there suddenly is Miss Bodkin, having signed in fraudulently in the space left blank by her good friend Miss Rees, a Miss Bodkin defying a gullible world to imagine that she was not present at least as early as Mr. Keasbey, and that she does not every day of her life make off with a first edition hidden away under one of Mrs. Ryder's lending library covers. . . . Joey Andrews feels waves of purple climbing shame-

## JOBS IN THE SKY

fully down his spine at the sight of Miss Bodkin's gooseberry breasts squeezed tight under her black satin dress; he remembers that it has been a long time since he has dared to ask a girl for a date, and that to-night is Christmas Eve.

Eight-thirty; and Mr. Keasbey, for the fifteenth annual successive time, leads his class as though he were the monitor, down the mezzanine stairs for Mr. Marvell's Christmas speech.

"... and Mr. Marvell who needs no introduction has come all the way from White Plains at this early hour to give us one and all his Christmas message." Mr. Sawyer of the Personnel speaking ("O thank you, thank you for nothing," murmured Miss Bodkin, her small face expressing sarcastic devotion; Mr. Keasbey delivered a withering glance; and Joey Andrews, though sick with admiration for her gooseberry breasts, moved away from her contaminating influence, for Joey, having had a job for only three weeks was still more in love with the job than he was with Miss Bodkin.).

Beyond where the shoe-clerks were gathered a white-haired man rose and bowed. "What a fine face," whispered Miss Paley; "he has Mr. Neely's eyebrows exactly." Faint applause, led by smart clapping of department heads, while the great man smiled dreamily.

"My friends ("Mister God in person," murmured Miss Bodkin mouthlessly; and Joey Andrews stared for comfort at the graveyard of boils on the back of Mr. Keasbey's neck): I only wish it were possible to know each and every, to shake each and every, to wish each and every but—the-femilay-of-M. & J.-is-too-large. (Laughter, the lingerie girls throwing themselves in fake passion against their shrouded counters; under cover of the polite sounds Miss Willows the buyer leaned across Joey Andrews and hissed *Miss Bodkin kindly stop that talking*. The white hairs in Mr. Keasbey's ears bristled sexagenarian triumph.) My friends, a spaycial responsibility toward your countray, your fellow-men, the femilay of M. & J. Have you ever stopped to think how the department stores contribute to the good cheer of this heppy holiday come rich and poor alike gifts for his

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

loved ones differences forgotten all men are equal at Christmas and who has the honor the privilege the blessing ("Bring on the castor oil," groaned Miss Bodkin).

"Who but you, my friends? And this year in especial when so many renegades and complainers of course a bad year but take the good with the bad life wouldn't be moch fon if we didn't have our ups and downs like our good friends the ladies of the elevators here—and our slogan is down with the complainers, friends, we don't want 'em here why, up at Princeton we used to wash out their mouths with soap maybe we ought to enlist the parfume gehls to do the same thing here. ("Haw haw" roared the shoe-clerks remembering public school but the book department merely smiled condescendingly, such humor was beneath them and they knew was meant to be.) Bear in mind my good friends a job for every good man or woman in this countray if you don't like this countray you can go to another if you don't like your job here you can leave it always plenty only glad step in shoes.

"One word in closing to the new friends taken on to help us in this merry busy season. We wish we could permanently retain each and every make a permanent member of the femilay of M. & J. each and every but let me say to each and every, *we* will do *our* baist if *you* will do *your* baist . . . and this is *your* big chance to prove yourselves invaluable to *us*, on this last day of the Christmas rush when *some* of our friends unfortunately *must be dropped*. (The book department glances briefly and guiltily at Miss Paley, who continues to stand with her hands clasped as though Mr. Marvell were the Principal leading assembly.) And I say this not merely to our new but it applies also to our old this is the day for *each* and *every*.

"In conclusion it is good-will that counts good cheer is the baist policy the spirit of Christmas all year round is our slogan we are one big femilay and we spread our good cheer our customers expect it demand it *pay* for it and now my friends I wish each and every a merry and profitable Christmas *keep on your toes all day our profit is your profit it may be that you can win*

## JOBS IN THE SKY

*yourself a permanent position* my friends I thank you each and every one."

Smatter of applause, Mr. Keasbey clapping on and on like an old Italian listening to the opera, while the section managers turned back toward their sections, but a thin man in a striped tie (Gadowsky who edited the monthly *M. & J. Banner*) leaped to a counter and cried: "Just one moment, friends. Let's give Mr. Marvell a hearty send-off to show our appreciation—altogether now, *M. & J. 'Tis of Thee*. . . ." The song straggled out across the floor; heads craned for a last glimpse of Mr. Marvell but Mr. Marvell was on his way back to White Plains; the song died.

O God, if the gang could see me now, thought Joey, taking his place for this day of days before his careful table of History and Biography. (Y'oughta forget that bunch, y'don't belong with them any more. And look around, look around, Jesus it's like heaven to be working.) Now there steals over the book department, the hat department, the entire floor below, a period of hurried hush, of calm excitement; a poised expectancy, denoting the birth of the store for this great day. Now the aisles lie flat and virgin, waiting, breathless and coy, for merry and profitable defilement. (Remember Pete . . . passed his examinations for the bar . . . in between starving he handed out grocers' handbills . . . and Dopey Simpson, turned down a job for \$11 . . . said he wouldn't stay straight under \$25 per.) Now you can hear Miss Bodkin whispering with Miss Rees about the rumored romances of Miss Fern Stacy the stationery girl: "When she said *three* I knew she was lying, there aren't three men in the city fool enough to propose to a girl a depression year like this." (Remember Rounds . . . been a scholarship boy at a swell prep-school until the depression cut down the scholarship fund . . . went around saying over Latin verbs to himself. . . . Dad said I'd meet swell fellows in New York, but he didn't think I'd find 'em on a park bench.) Now the large clock over the entrance doors jumps to eight fifty-three; Miss

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Paley stands sweet and serious like a school-teacher—and God, it's as safe as being in school again, thinks Joey, coming here every day, nice and warm, watching the clock jump like that on its way to nine. . . . Mrs. Summers, her eyebrows dancing like harassed ghosts, limps like a nervous shepherd among her flock; only seven minutes more of that limping, Mrs. Summers! M. & J. expects courtesy health good cheer of its employees, the customers expect it demand it PAY for it. . . .

Now Miss Paley closes *The Old Wives' Tale* with the best-speller's handkerchief in her place, and stands lifting her melancholy mask like a lamp waiting to be lighted. Behind her you can see tucked over a row of books her pocketbook, another of her many crumpled handkerchiefs, a pocket-comb; for Miss Paley has moved in (despite the rumors), Miss Paley has settled in (she has not heard the rumors), among the cheap books as she had for two decades in her classroom, this is *your* day, Miss Paley, to prove yourself invaluable, and *yours* too, Joey Andrews, and *yours* and *yours* and *yours*, each and every . . . (Remember Jonesy, a real bum, Jonesy . . . turned Christian and left the gang, went and hung about with the Christers on the Y breadlines . . . pan-handling and spending his pennies on Sterno which he converted into alcohol by filtering through his handkerchief at the horse-trough at the end of the Bowery . . . in his Sterno he thought or pretended he thought he was Jesus. But Rounds who had been a scholarship boy said he'd go Red before he'd stand on a breadline or sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" like Jonesy.) Now you can hear Miss Bodkin: "I hate this Goddam place, they fix the quotas high so nobody can possibly make a commission except the week before Christmas." Foolish Miss Bodkin! a daughter of the femilay of M. & J. doesn't she know when she's well off? Take care, Miss Bodkin, this is *your* day too. (Remember fumbling in the ash-can for a paper before turning in—those nights you hadn't the wherewithal for a flop—turning in on the grassy center of Washington Square, surrounded by those beautiful houses . . . dreaming and planning with Rounds the One Perfect Hold-up—can Mrs. Summers read

## JOBS IN THE SKY

the mind? . . . remembering, because you couldn't sleep, how long it had been since you had had a girl . . . remembering, because you couldn't sleep for the drunks singing at the other end of the dormitory, *If you've said your prayers Joey my son no harm can come to you.*) Now Mr. Keasbey stands at the top of the mezzanine stairs with a dignity like the dignity of a painless dentist, his arms folded, threatening and somber, as he turns and prepares for his victims. Miss Willows herself descends from her desk and takes a position in the middle of the floor sucking her beads, a débutante hostess waiting, leaning forward from the hips, to greet the crowds that must be stamping outside in the Christmas cold. Now the outside entrance doors are thrown open and you can see the waiting customers pour into the vestibule, sliding and coming to a stop like beads in a box. Now the big clock jumps to eight fifty-eight; Mrs. Summers can limp for two minutes more, and she limps from clerk to clerk, her eyebrows dancing, begging everybody to remember the Christmas spirit, and that extra pencils will be under each cash register.

*(You can get anywhere in this country with an education my son said his father . . . oh, gee pop, you were right, if you could only see me now! I want you to have a high-school diploma son.)* Now the aisles below lie flat and smooth like roads, and the customers stamping in the lobby are a frenzied herd of cattle. "Watch the customers sharply," said Miss Willows; "and remember there are plenty of store detectives in disguise all over the store watching every move you make." Remember there are plenty of detectives, remember this is *your* day, remember the Christmas spirit . . . remember they stood on a corner of Fourteenth Street where a young man promised them a bad winter and Rounds said "I'd sooner go Red than stand on a breadline," and Joey Andrews shook in his thin-soled shoes for he knew he'd starve sooner than stand on a breadline and he felt he'd stand on a breadline sooner than go Red . . . remember, *keep on your toes all day there will be detectives watching every move you make this is your big day to prove . . . remember Washington Square Park. . . .*

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Where a bench was turned permanently outward, making a cosy little entrance to the grass hotel, a gateway to the open-air sleeping quarters for which no rent was charged, to which one came democratically without luggage, without even a full stomach. Remember you stood at the gateway, fumbling in a refuse barrel with your head well in, selected a *Times*—the tabloids are better reading but too narrow for practical use—for your blanket, mattress, pillow, bed-lamp, water-carafe and chamber-pot. On the grass you chose a spot among the reclining forms and lit your good-night butt. "Lousy flop-house joints," your neighbor murmured; "a plate of soup, a free wash—who in hell wants a wash?" Bug-Eye the one-legger from the World War had to show off by springing over the fence instead of coming in nicely through the revolving doors. "They say he can still feel that leg . . . do you believe that?" "Shut up and give me a Chesterfield—oh, well, a Lucky will do." "Amo, amare . . . amas, amat," murmured Rounds regretfully, as he picked himself up to go again to the lavatory; he was having serious trouble with his stomach, no green vegetables . . . "There'll be pie in the sky by and by," sang Dopey Simpson. "Shut up, there, lights out, no more talking."

Stars in the sky overhead, pie in the sky, moon in the sky, dreams, girls, pie, jobs in the sky too.

"Move over." It is Jonesy the Christer, lit on Sterno. "If you believe, believe, believe on the Lord . . ." "Smart Aleck, dirty sucker, hanging around the Y . . . mamma's boy . . ." *Papa can anybody in the country be the president?*

Three drunks sitting on the bench too happy to go to bed (sitting in the lobby of their swell hotel, drinking, guzzling, gossiping.) "Yesh shir, the mosht turrible thing in thish country is the bootlegger liquor . . . all the lovely young college boys going to theif raksh and ruinsh . . ." "If you believe, believe, belixe. . . ." *Yes, my son and remember Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin and Our Lord was born in a Manger.* "In the war we had such nice warm mud . . ." "Shut up, Bug-Eye, what'd it get you?" "In the war we had such nice warm blood



## JOBS IN THE SKY

..." "If I wash president of the United Statesh, firshst thing I'd do I'd forbid the lovely young college boys. . . ." *Just close your eyes Joey if you've said your prayers nothing can happen to you.* "Such nice warm mud . . ." "Sometimes I think Bug-Eye's just plain nuts." "I lost my leg in Avalon . . ." "Onward Chris-tian so-o-oldiers." "When we ask them for something to e-a-t." Rounds came back from the lavatory: "I can't remember a deponent verb, I hate to forget all that." "If you believe, believe, believe. . . ." *Do I have to eat spinach mamma? Yes, Joey think of the little Belgian boys who haven't any—and it will make you big and strong.* "Work and pray, live on hay, there'll be jobs in the sky by and by." Rounds said all the comfort stations in the world wouldn't bring him comfort any more . . . he needed steamed vegetables . . . he said he'd go Red before he'd stand on a breadline. "Work and pray, live on hay, there'll be jobs in the sky. . . ." "Onward Chrissstian Soldiers. . . ." One of the drunks on the bench was putting into action an experiment he had heard of: thoughtfully tapping one knee with the side of his hand to see if he was still alive. He was not. He toppled over into his cold bed beneath the stars and if those gay boys sitting up and singing in their open-air dormitory thought they weren't spending that night with a corpse they were making just one hell of a mistake. . . . Remember how that morning, remember how all that day, remember . . . *remember this is your day, Joey Andrews. . . .*

The bell rings, it is nine o'clock. Miss Willows wets her lips against the first polite speech of the day. Mr. Keasbey goes rigid with desire. Mrs. Summers stands erect at last on her varicose legs.

The heavy doors swing open. The mob in the vestibule surges and squirms; animals stampeding in panic inside a burning barn; then breaks suddenly, spilling like thick syrup down the aisles.

The machinery starts with a roar: unorganized come into conflict with organized; the clerks are overpowered, the floor-walkers swept into the stream of customers; the aisles are

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

drowned; arms reach like fishing-rods into the piled bargains on every counter. But gradually the frantic haphazard customers are subdued and controlled by the competent motions of well-trained officers, who reason, who separate, who mollify and implore. Still mad, but under direction at last, the crowd settles around counters screaming to be fed.

The mezzanine grows tense with desire for invasion.

The first customer toys with one foot on the stairs; pinches her pocketbook and climbs laboriously upward. Miss Bodkin's short, smart legs run to capture; but over Miss Bodkin's black banded head Mr. Keasbey has already made a dignified assignation; like one hypnotized the customer makes her way surely and pointedly toward those grave commanding eyes. Miss Bodkin turns back in anger; meets Joey Andrews' admiring eye, and irresponsibly sticks out her tongue. Joey Andrews feels his confidence in No. 191-23, 167B slip a little as he sees with a pang Miss Bodkin guessing he is absolutely no good with girls.

"Mrs. Summerssss assign please!" Miss Bodkin bags the day's next sale.

Surely these determined ladies and gentlemen (or are all the gentlemen detectives?) are not the same race as those tentative unhurried customers who loitered and weighed two weeks ago. Now they hurried fiercely, became mad people at indecision, rapidly bought two if they could not decide upon one. After favoring her customer with a cheap *Lorna Doone* off her Classics table, Miss Bodkin with malice and caution sells her the latest detective story right off Mr. Keasbey's beautifully stacked table, right under Mr. Keasbey's bristling but dignified nose. Mr. Keasbey bending his stately professorial back takes out his feather-duster and gives his books where Miss Bodkin has ravaged them a quick indignant flick. Miss Bodkin retires with the slyness of a nun to her own table.

A lady grazing close to Joey Andrews is captured by Mr. Keasbey two strides ahead of Miss Bodkin who retires viciously blowing her bang off her eyes, and in passing murmurs, "If I printed what I thought about the sixty-year-old teacher's pet, it

## JOBS IN THE SKY

would make a book too awful even for my own Classics table." But all the lady wanted and she said so too frankly was a ninety-five-cent copy of *Robinson Crusoe* for the kids and when Mr. Keasbey lost out trying to explain the value of the three-fifty illustrated issue on his own table, he turned her over in haste to Miss Paley; because Christmas is here, and Miss Paley's cheap editions are petty game at this season to an old hunter like Mr. Keasbey. . . . But Miss Paley receives the gift gratefully and looking at Mr. Keasbey's dignified face, who knows but she forgets for a minute Mr. Neely. Now Joey Andrews has his day's first customer, and he will never forget her kind eyes and brown fur coat as she stands eagerly waiting for him to wrap her package with the Christmas twine. Miss Paley, on her varicose knees hunting and hunting for *Robinson Crusoe* which is hard to find because it is exactly the color and size of the *Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*, lifts a face modestly benign with the joy of laboring to catch her breath, for Miss Paley knows from her last decade's experience that if she rose too quickly she was apt to get the least little bit of swimming in the head.

The invisible electric wire carried rumors from clerk to clerk. Free lunch would be served in the basement; twenty minutes to eat. A hat-girl had been arrested for stealing change. A shoplifter was caught downstairs. The man in the gray felt hat was a store detective. The store had already done one-eighth more business than it had done by eleven-thirty of last year's Christmas Eve. Miss Bodkin's sales were higher than Mr. Keasbey's. Miss Stacy had run out of Christmas stickers three times. Mrs. Ryder had sent down a twenty-dollar bill to be changed (no clerk was permitted to make change of anything higher than a ten out of his cash register) and the bill had not come back, after thirty minutes.

The first batch went to the free lunch at eleven forty-five. They came back. They talked. They conquered. There was no second batch, except Miss Paley who went for a cup of tea. Miss Bodkin said the lunch was made of pieces of wrapping paper from returned purchases of 1929.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Mrs. Summers asked Joey Andrews if he thought he could make out without any lunch. Joey Andrews said sure and dashed off to his next customer.

Joey Andrews was drunk. If for a moment he found himself without a customer he ran up to one lady after another like a lost child seeking its mother.

Miss Willows forgot that for the last two years she had been buyer for the book department; the fire of selling caught in her veins again; she sold passionately. Let Miss Bodkin take the credit down in her salesbook, let Mr. Keasbey receive the commission—but let Miss Willows sell again! Her pearls caught on the edge of a table; scattered underfoot—Miss Willows laughed; turned to a customer and kicked the pearls recklessly out of her way. Miss Willows too was drunk.

Miss Bodkin whispered that her sales had reached \$150.

Miss Willows greeting customers at the top of the stairs had lost her débutante coolness and become a barker for a three-ring circus.

Mr. Keasbey broke down a reserve of years and squeezed Joey's arm as he pushed him out of his way.

Miss Paley, weak from no lunch, brushed her hand-across her eyes and smiled until her whole head ached.

So it went on, and Mrs. Summers passed among them, conspicuous for her white head, for her customer-like lined face, and in the back of her distracted eyes lurked worry like guilt.

Who shall say that even Mr. Keasbey was actively, consciously motivated by the few cents' commission he was piling up? Each one was simply part of a great selling team, schooled and trained to perfection, each part functioned perfectly. All the time the crowd was changing, but imperceptibly; the stream which fed it must be flowing as fast as the stream which ebbed away. Now one was handing fifty-seven cents change to a gentleman with a green tie, now one was looking through the crowd for the lady with the feather.

In all his life Joey Andrews had never been so happy. His day was measured by customers, not by sales. He was mad with the

## JOBS IN THE SKY

delight of being necessary to so many people at once, with being efficient for his great team, with knowing exactly what part he had to play.

Miss Willows's voice grew hoarse, strangely naked she looked without her beads too—this way for calendars, this way for the latest fiction—Miss Willows was selling herself and was lost in passion.

But worry was growing out of Mrs. Summers's eyes. She hovered for a brief second about Miss Paley as she swung open the drawer of her cash register. The invisible wires hummed again: Has Miss Paley, maybe Miss Paley, it looks as if Miss Paley. . . . But Miss Paley, blind and dazed and cheerful, still flies among her cheap editions, still makes her way mildly in the commercial world.

Still the crowd filled the aisles, covered the floor. Only now the incoming stream was heavier than the outgoing, complemented by clerks and secretaries from Brooklyn to the Bronx. There was no slack, no shading. Even as there was no telling how the crowd melted and swelled again, there was no telling whether one's feet hurt or did not hurt; not only did no one attend to bodily functions, it was as if they had ceased to exist.

To get to your cash register now meant a hand-to-hand battle. The little bells rang as clerks shot out their drawers, counted rapidly, slammed them shut again. Joey Andrews clicked his open; good God, the bills under the weight were rising mountainously. He wasted a second of M. & J.'s time: he felt with his fingers the soft resistant pad of bills.

Mrs. Summers, with her kind and tortured smile, her worried eyes, her dancing brows, hovered briefly about Joey Andrews's cash register. Mr. Andrews . . . Mr. Andrews. . . . Joey Andrews gave her a bright child's look with eyes which looked swiftly away, beyond her, in liaison with his next customer.

Feet were like rubber tires now. Bodies were conveyors of books. Minds were adding machines. Fleeting glimpses of strained and happy faces—it might be Christmas, it might be the warm contact of body with body, of air made of the mingling

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

of human breaths, it might be the happy exchange of one human tribe, with another, the excitement, the warmth, the continuous roar of sound. . . .

There was a slight lull, as there may be a lull in a storm. Joey Andrews, running like a mountain goat, caught Miss Bodkin's round black eyes, caught Mrs. Summers's level worried look . . . and then he found the eye of a lady with a scar on her throat, who was holding out a book to him, begging, begging, for the kindness of his service. . . . And then there was a flurry of ladies with anxious faces and Boy Scout nephews in the sticks; Miss Rees had a sudden success with her *Green Mountain Boys* and Joey Andrews deserted History and Biography to take on her overflow. And the human storm was loose again, wrapping them all together in an efficient human mass. . . . Mrs. Summers stands like a bird of ill omen hovering over Miss Paley's cash register.

The invisible electric wires are humming again. Six hat-girls are going to be dropped, three of them old employees, three of them just taken on for the Christmas rush. They don't tell them, says Miss Bodkin viciously, until the last minute—so they'll keep on selling to the end. Miss Bodkin knows everything before any one else. Paley's going to get hers, too, I know it, says Miss Bodkin—and Joey Andrews wonders what Miss Bodkin is doing to-night, on Christmas Eve, he wonders if he might have the nerve. . . .

Five twenty-five. Joey Andrews flew to his cash register, back to the customer with scar on her throat, back to his beloved cash register. "Well," says Miss Paley to Mrs. Summers, "it can't be helped and it can't be helped." It has happened. Miss Paley's got the sack. They've told Miss Paley they're letting her go. This is Miss Paley's last day. What do you think, Paley's just been fired. Jesus, poor old Paley. . . . Joey Andrews has a customer who wants something in green to match her library curtains. "Heavens knows," Miss Paley said, "I cannot understand, cannot comprehend . . ." and everybody knows that Miss Paley is using big words to keep from crying and to show that she was a

## JOBS IN THE SKY

teacher for twenty years. Joey Andrews's customer would prefer something a shade darker; maybe that Oscar Wilde. Mrs. Summers with her eyebrows going like an orchestra leader's baton: "I just feel terrible about this, Miss Paley, just terrible, I knew it last night and I couldn't sleep, they don't let us tell you till the last minute." Joey Andrews's customer doesn't see why they don't put out a Shakespeare in green suede—or even a dictionary.

Some one wants to buy Miss Paley's copy of *The Old Wives' Tale*. Such a nice lady, Miss Paley would like to tell her how much she loves that book. "Next to my Jane Austen," she says, holding her side as she graciously hands over the book. "The commercial world," says Miss Paley, reaching over for the wrapping paper. "My principal told me," Miss Paley said. "A natural teacher. Born not made. He told me in so many words. . . ."

The clock jumps to five twenty-seven. Three minutes more in the commercial world, Miss Paley. Three minutes more of non-limping, Mrs. Summers. Three minutes more of being a human being, Miss Willows!

Mr. Keasbey is smiling like a boy. Christmas Eve—he hasn't missed one in sixty years with his mother; bought her a shawl, he did, on the third floor, got the employees' discount; had it for her in his locker. Good cook the old lady, probably spent the whole day getting up his Christmas dinner. "My principal told me," Miss Paley said; "he is a man who never minces words. 'Myra Paley,' he told me. . . ." Joey Andrews flies back to his cash register, he does not like to look at Miss Paley any more, Mrs. Summers is standing tentatively. "Mr. Andrews, oh, Mr. Andrews." Joey Andrews eyes her with his bright-eyed look, punching at the buttons which make the drawer slide out and tap him gently in the stomach: "Mr. Andrews, I see you are too busy now." "My job at the school," Miss Paley says, "is gone; it's gone, my principal told me." Mrs. Summers is off again, non-limping her last two minutes, like an unwilling bird of ill-omen off with her little messages—the hat girls now.

And at last the closing bell rang and customers clung where

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

they had been indifferent before and sales-clerks turned cold who had been themselves leeches ten seconds earlier, and customers would not, could not, tear themselves away until *Stars Fell on Alabama*, was sent to Arkansas and the *Motion Picture Girls* to Far Rockaway and until they had made ab-so-lutely sure that the price was erased from the Grosset and Dunlap edition of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*—and Joey Andrews, making out a final sales-check, catches Miss Bodkin's eye on him at last, kindly at last, friendly at last, as if at last she were perceiving him, and Joey Andrews's heart leaps with the thought of Christmas Eve and the chance, the bare chance, that Miss Bodkin, with her gay little bobbing breasts. . . .

"My principal told me," says Miss Paley, not sitting as she had last night, on a counter and girlishly swinging her varicose legs as she added up her sales—but standing off a little, apart from them, as the great store empties, as the people whom the employees of M. & J. have served all day go home and leave the store to the clerks, to whom it properly belongs, Miss Paley stands all by herself, while Mrs. Summers, avoiding her now, for Miss Paley is dead, moves like a plague from hat-girl to hat-girl, infecting them, six of them, with the poison from headquarters that has killed Miss Paley. Miss Bodkin, although she has higher sales than any one else with the possible exception of Mr. Keasbey (who bends his hand over his salesbook as though he fears some one might copy his sums), subdues her joy in her sales as a man uncovers his head for a passing funeral—and there is no doubt about it now at all, Miss Bodkin is definitely smiling at Joey Andrews as if she liked him.

They handed Miss Paley her handkerchiefs and pencils in silence. For all they were kind to her, and patted her shoulders, they were really hurrying her a little too, hurrying her out of their lives—Miss Paley was bad luck. "Maybe your next job will be a sitting-down one, honey," said Mrs. Summers, limping at last. They all wished Miss Paley would hurry. It is not nice to see some one dead. "Good-bye, all," Miss Paley said, and with a last bewildered look set her feet on the stairs to make her exit



## JOBS IN THE SKY

from the commercial world. And they watched Miss Paley float out with her handkerchiefs, her pencils, and her varicose legs, and all of them knew they would never see her again—and Joey Andrews, turning back with relief to his salesbook, gathered courage to return Miss Bodkin's smile.

Mrs. Summers is bearing down upon Joey, smiling too, suddenly every one is smiling at Joey, Joey Andrews is a good boy and every one is smiling very kindly at him and Joey happily smiles back. "Different with you, you are young," Mrs. Summers is saying. Young, yes, Joey Andrews is young as hell, and Miss Bodkin evidently thinks she has smiled at him too boldly, for now she lowers her eyes to her salesbook again. "You are young and life holds many opportunities," Mrs. Summers says, smiling and smiling. "They don't let us tell them till the last minute, I tried to tell you but you were so busy, you were so happy, but it's different with you, you're so young," says Mrs. Summers, smiling pleadingly for forgiveness. Of course I am young, thinks Joey Andrews, impatient with the old, with the white-haired Mrs. Summers—and he tries to catch Miss Bodkin's eye again and signal her, we're both young, to-night's Christmas Eve—but the old will never have done talking to the young, and Mrs. Summers goes on: "and so if you will leave your things to-night on my desk, and come for your pay-check next Thursday. . . ." Nobody is smiling at Joey Andrews now, everybody is looking down very conscientiously at his own salesbook, he feels without knowing quite why that they are anxious to have him go, he hurries through counting the sales he scored for M. & J., he stands apart a little as Miss Paley had, and when Miss Bodkin, not smiling any more now, comes and asks him in a low voice if he would like to come to her party to-night, just a few friends, just Miss Rees and herself and a few of the fellows, Joey Andrews says stiffly, "Thanks very much, I have a date," for Joey Andrews knows now why Miss Bodkin took to smiling at him so suddenly, Miss Bodkin knows everything ahead of every one else—and Joey Andrews is not going to hang around people and be bad luck.

## A Jeeter Wedding\*

DOROTHY THOMAS

*Dorothy Thomas was born in Kansas, has spent six years on a homestead in Alberta, Canada, and now lives in Nebraska. A Jeeter Wedding was widely praised on its appearance in magazine form, and later was made the final story in a series concerning the characters, Ma Jeeter's Girls. Alfred A. Knopf, 1934.*

THERE WAS nothing about the dilapidated Jeeter farmstead to recommend it as a lodging place except its nearness to the schoolhouse and the fact that the Clay Creek teachers had always stayed there. The house was unpainted and caveless, with a narrow front door that opened on to nothingness above a high stone foundation. There were hair-lined holes in the foundation where sleepy dogs crawled out of hiding to bark a time or two and wag their tails for visitors. A clay and cinder path led around to the littered back stoop and the one usable door.

Inside, the place was more cheerful, with checkered tablecloths, rag rugs, and the choicest farm calendars of the last decade.

There was a large family of Jeeters, but at the time I came to stay with them there were only five at home: the old mother, the two sons, a daughter, and a baby granddaughter. The other daughters, excepting the youngest, who was "working out" in a railway town "down the line a way," were married and lived on nearby farms. Before the first month was gone I met them all, big, blue-eyed, loud-voiced women, with the smell of the kitchen and the stable about them, and liked them well enough.

\*From *The American Mercury*, September, 1931. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf.

## A JEETER WEDDING

Ma Jeeter was a large woman with an enormous bosom that oozed down over the belt of her gray print dress and lay flat on her broad stomach. One of her eyes was gone. After I had been with her awhile she told me how she came to lose it.

"It was the Spring I was carrying my third girl," she said. "I went out to holler the men-folks up for dinner and fell off the stoop and broke it on some bush stubs. I was scared it would mark the baby but it didn't. I don't miss it much. Pa always said I should have a glass one but we just never got 'round to send off for it."

One of her knees was stiff so that she could not bend her leg at all.

"I don't know that it was really broke," she told me. "I was milkin' a heifer, and she kicked me, and by night my leg was black to the hip, and poulticin' didn't seem to help it none, and when I could get up and bear my weight on it again, that leg wouldn't bend. It's eleven years since I been upstairs. It's hard to piece the quilts I've pieced and never see 'em on the beds."

Some days her leg hurt her and she used a crutch her older son had made for her of a piece of gas pipe, bent at one end, and made comfortable for her arm with a piece of carpet wound about it. She had two chins. The upper one was bearded, and lay darkly upon the doughish whiteness of the lower one. She was a good cook and a good talker, and I liked to sit on the edge of the cob box and watch and listen while she lurched about the room getting supper.

The elder son was a broad-shouldered man of thirty with an entirely bald head. He had an impediment in his speech. When strangers spoke to him he fixed his blue eyes on them, and puckered his mouth and waited for the words he hoped to speak. While he waited a deep blush crept up over his baldness, and his Adam's apple rose and fell yearningly until the words came. In spite of his shyness and his speech difficulty, neighbors were always stopping their wagons to talk with him awhile.

The younger son was beginning his third year in the eighth grade of the school where I taught. He had the family good

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

nature and was always willing to carry in the cobs for the stove.

Lena, the one girl at home, was the most quiet of the Jeeter women. She liked to get out of doors, and would spread up the beds, and do what sweeping she considered necessary, and be out about the stables, or in the cornfield with her brothers, early in the morning, leaving the cooking and the care of her two-year-old daughter to her mother. Cold Winter mornings she plodded about the barnyard in an old green coat of her brother's, her red petticoat whipping about her legs.

Ma told me about Lena one Saturday morning when I was helping her tie a comforter.

"Lena's been awful unlucky," she said. "The neighbors will tell you if I don't, and I'd sooner you'd git the straight of it. This child here ain't her first. The other was a boy; he's in a home in Omaha if he ain't been adopted out. I guess she'd sooner have kept him than this little one if she'd knowed what was comin'. She was workin' out in town then. The father was a married man but he liked her a lot, and he done what he could for her. He sent her to a hospital in Omaha to have it, which is more than any of the other girls can boast. It was a fine boy; weighed twelve pounds.

"This other fellow was our own hired man and a nicer man we never had on the place. He always shook his shoes out on a paper after he'd been in the fields, and he'd go out on the stoop to smoke his pipe after supper even when it was cold, and he could play the organ too. He didn't seem put out, much, when Lena told him, and said he'd marry her, all right. The afternoon of the day she told him he took a load of grain to town and about nine o'clock the elevator man calls up and asks if that was our team tied up by the mill, and we never heard of him again.

"Some families has one weakness, and some has another. The Marshall boys is druunk half the time, and those Peaveys have six or seven kids that has been caught stealin'. I say a weakness is just a weakness and there's worse than the weakness this fam-

## A JEETER WEDDING

ily's got. I don't say our girls didn't have their babies sooner than they should of, but they was awful good girls, and they's awful good mothers. All their husbands seem satisfied with 'em, even if some of 'em did rear up a little about marryin' 'em. You'll hear it said round here, maybe, 'There'll be a Jeeter weddin' if you don't watch out,' when they're guyin' a fellow, instead of sayin', 'There'll be a sheriff weddin'.' That ain't just. There was some dispute all right over some of the weddin's, but we had to call the sheriff for only one, and we got four girls married, and then, there's Evie—"

### II

Ma was almost certain to turn any conversation toward Evie, her best, smartest, and fairest daughter. I had not met Evie, but the school records, which showed that she had passed the county eighth-grade examinations the first try, and the fact that she had "worked out" three years without the breath of scandal coming near her, and the prettiness of her photograph on the living-room organ, upheld Ma's judgment.

There was a story Ma liked to tell about this favorite child. "The Kellys that Evie worked for before she went to town to work, is awful good workers, and awful good Catholics. That family will get up in the middle of the night to get their chores done so as to get to the early church meetin' in town on time, but they've had their share of bad luck the same as anybody. Three different times they've had their barn buildings struck by lightnin' and their house struck once. They got so scared of thunder-storms that they kept a candle burnin' in front of a saint picture in the hall upstairs, all fixed so it couldn't set the house afire.

"That was to keep the house from bein' hit, and burnin' that candle wasn't all they done. They went to a church in Omaha, or Sioux City, or some place, and had a special mass-meetin' put on against thunder and lightnin', and come home with a jarful of holy water they'd had blessed to keep the kids from bein' struck. One night Mrs. Kelly woke Evie up yellin', 'Evie! Evie!

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Go down and get the holy water,' and Evie got up, and started downstairs, and she said it was enough to make your blood harden to see that candle puffin' up, and almost goin' out, and puttin' long shadders on the wall, and the lightnin' comin' about twice a minute, and the wind and the rain just terrible. She said it made her sick to her stummick.

"She went into the pantry and climbed up and reached for the jar of holy water, and just as she shut her hands on the jar, there come a flash of lightnin' like to blind, and a terrible clap of thunder right on it, and she lost her footin' and down she come and busted the jar to shivers and spilled all the holy water. That stuff musta cost more than good whiskey, and Mrs. Kelly was standin' at the top of the stairs jumpin' up and down, I guess, and yellin', 'Evie! Evie! Bring that holy water!' and Evie, quick as a trigger, fills another jar, and screws the cap on it, that had been on the holy water jar, because it had a red streak on it to mark it, and wiped the water off the side of it with her gown, and goes runnin' upstairs and Mrs. Kelly grabs it and runs and sprinkles all the kids, and Evie gets back in bed and lays awake all the rest of the night so she'd be the first one down in the mornin' to sweep up the glass."

Lena sometimes seemed a little jealous of her mother's pride in Evie, but one Saturday morning when she was dusting the living-room she took Evie's photograph from its place on the organ and squatted down and held the picture where her little girl could look at it. "See!" she said. "That's your Aunt Evie. Ain't she purty? Say 'Aunt Evie!'" and there was honest family pride in her voice.

If Lena's child had a real name I never heard it. Her mother seldom spoke to her, but her uncles and her grandmother talked to her a great deal, and called her Babe. When anyone spoke to her she put her thin hands up over her face, palms outward, and whimpered shyly. I think Ma was secretly ashamed of this unJeeter-like bad nature and tried to make it look like playfulness by saying, when the child put her hands over her eyes, "Babe want to play peek? Come play peek with Grandma!"

## A JEETER WEDDING

That Fall I knitted the child a little red sweater. She was very proud of it and went about patting her stomach and saying "Pretty."

One evening shortly after the Christmas holidays I worked until dusk at the schoolhouse. When I came in through the kitchen, Lena met my hello with a sad sniff, and a sullen stare. Babe was sitting in her high chair by the cupboard making the weary sounds she made when she had cried a long time and was about to give it up. I took a match from the box on the warming-oven and went into the living-room to light the lamp. As I was feeling for the chimney I smelled the faint sour-dough smell that was Ma's and saw that she was huddled in her chair beside the base burner, crying. I knew that she wanted to talk to me.

"I am glad Pa died when he did," she began. "I'm glad he never lived till now. I was settin' here in this room the day he died, with the front door open to get a draft through, it was so hot. I was settin' right where the stove is now, shellin' a mess of peas, and all at once I heard Pa callin' me. I jumped up from where I was, and let the pan fall on the floor, and ran out the door, and there was Pa staggerin' up to the stoop, and Evie and the baby was standin' lookin' at him with their eyes big, and awful scared for their Pa. And he look up at me breathin' hard and says, 'Ma, I'm took,' and sure 'nuf he was took, took with a stroke from workin' in the awful heat, and he sunk down with his back against the house and his legs stuck out stiff in front of him, and then little Evie, she come and stood up close, lookin' at him, and he opens his eyes, and sees her, and holds out his arms and says, 'Evel' and then he give a shiver, and death comes on him, and he rolls up his eyes and flops over dead. But I'm glad he died when he did."

I waited with the chimney in my hand, knowing that some catastrophe more recent than Pa's death had fallen on the house.

"Light the lamp," she said at last, "and I'll show you the letter. I guess I don't need to make such a fuss about a thing that's happened so many times in this house. I guess I didn't

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

have no reason to think she was so much better than the rest of 'em, but I did think it, and after this long time she's been workin' out and got along so well, and everyone sayin' how nice she is. Some days I've set here and think how she'd maybe go awhile with some awful nice man, and get engaged, and have a ring. I always did wish I'd have one girl to be engaged, and then be married with the preacher out from town, and all the neighbors in, and a cake and everything, but I guess it's like I said; a weakness is a weakness and there's no use hopin' against it."

Evie's letter was brief:

*Dear Mama*—I guess you will be surprised. I am coming home in a couple of weeks to get married. I can't wait. Bill says he is willing we should get married right away and at home. He is a brakeman and has a good run.

*Love,*

EVIE.

Even the brothers seemed downcast about Evie's coming marriage. The bald one shook his head sadly when I got out the checker-board that night, and the younger one sniffled over his arithmetic. Lena slapped Babe when the child got between the lamp and her mending and Ma sat by the stove and sighed.

The gloom did not lift. Summoned by Ma, the daughters came over one at a time to mourn with her. When I came in at night I would find one of them sitting with her in the living-room, red-eyed with family sympathy. No one said, "I told you so," or "She's no better than the rest of us, and I always expected this to happen." Like Ma, they had loved her best, and believed that she would escape the shame they had each weathered so bravely, and come home some day to give them a fine Christian wedding, and save them from their sins.

### III

Then one night, a week before they expected her, Evie came home. We were all in the living-room, and none of us had noticed



## A JEETER WEDDING

the car driving into the yard. We all started up when the door opened and Evie came in, laughing, and stamping the snow from her shoes. "Made the mailman bring me out," she said, and her voice was not loud like the other girls' voices.

Her brothers got to their feet and stood looking at her. Ma made an indefinite gesture toward her crutch and dropped her hands back on to her lap. She was crying. Evie went to her and laid a pink cheek against her hair. "Aren't you glad to see me?" she asked. Ma nodded toward me, and mumbled an introduction, and Evie said, "Pleased to know you," and smiled brightly. Evie kissed them all and then the boys went out to the kitchen and I rose too, but Ma said, "No, you stay," and, turning to Evie, "It's all right. I told her. She knows how it is." Evie smiled at me again. "Sure, don't everybody run away. Lena, have you made me some gowns, or underthings, or anything?"

"No," said Lena, "and you don't need to be so smart about it."

Ma put her arm about Evie's little waist. "You still look real nice; that's something," she said. "If you'd have wrote that your patterns was still all right we'd have made you some clothes. We did talk about it, but the girls said likely you couldn't get into them, so we give it up. You won't need much. You wasn't plannin' on havin' anybody outside, was you?"

"Say," said Evie, "I'm going to have everybody, and a dress, and a veil, and a cake. Why, Ma, you didn't think I had to *make* Bill marry me, did you, that I was going to have a baby or anything?"

I thought Ma was fainting. She slipped down from her chair, her stiff leg thrust out in front of her like a gray log, and closed her arms about her girl. "Evie, Evie," she sobbed. "My good baby!"

Into Evie's wedding preparations, the Jeeter women put all the dreams they had ever had of weddings. The sisters came by twos and threes now, and Babe had other children to play with. The boys brought a paperhanger out from town, and had

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

the living-room repapered. I offered my room for a sewing-room, and after school hours I sewed too. The sisters never tired of admiring the engagement ring. Evie explained the letter over and over again.

"I said he was willing to marry me at home because I went to so much bother to coax him into letting us be married here, instead of in town where all his friends is. I said I couldn't wait because I was afraid he would change his mind, if we waited, and hold out for being married in town, and besides he's going to get a leave and he's getting passes on his railroad for us to take a trip. The lady where I worked would have give me a wedding but I wanted to come home."

Ma could not go up to my room to sew because of her leg, so she sat at the bottom of the stairway and basted the pieces the girls tossed down to her, and kept her many grand-children from getting in the paperhanger's paste. She and the girls called back and forth, and when a garment reached the trying-on stage Evie would be pinned into it and they would all go down to have Ma look it over.

Lena seemed no less happy than the rest. One day Evie found a picture in one of my magazines of a bridal party with a little tot in a Kate Greenaway costume carrying the ring in a lily, and called all the girls to come and look at it.

"We'll have it like that," she decided. "Babe can carry the lily. Won't she look cute in a pink dress?"

"Aw, she's too little," Lena protested. "You'd better have one of the other girls' kids."

But Evie had decided. "Babe is the one I want," she said, and Lena blushed, laughed, and bent her head over her sewing, and the married sisters looked at Evie with all their love in their faces.

The wedding day was perfect. Snow had fallen in the night and much of the ugliness of the farmyard was hidden. The sisters and their families came for breakfast. The groom was there by ten and the guests began to arrive before eleven. Ma's bed in the downstairs bedroom could not hold all the gifts.

## A JEETER WEDDING

Each guest put down his present with a gesture which said, "We've brought something pretty nice. We like the Jeeters and we like this wedding. In fact, this gift is as nice as it is to make up for all the gifts we should have brought the Jeeter girls at all the weddings there should have been."

The groom was a big, good-looking fellow. The men who had married Jeeter girls at very quiet Jeeter weddings shook hands with him and told him he was getting the pick of the lot.

A neighbor played a march on the organ and Evie came down from my room, very pretty in white satin and tulle. Lena's Babe went before her in bright pink taffeta, her slightly dingy underwear showing a little at the neck, the stem of the lily clasped in her thin fists. No lily in bloom had been found in the greenhouses of the two nearest towns, but the lily idea was not to be given up, so Lena, who was handiest with scissors, had cut one from crêpe paper, and fashioned it wondrously, bright green leaves and all, and one of the older girls had added the final touch by sprinkling it with sachet.

Though I stood across the room from Ma during the ceremony, I heard her breathing and saw her soft chins trembling. The daughter who had curled and arranged her hair had snipped off her beard, and dusted her well with pink powder so that she did not look like herself, but her teary blue eye was natural, and lively enough. Lena stood beside me, tall and proud, and kept her eyes on her little daughter. It was the happiest wedding I ever saw.

The dinner was Ma's particular triumph. Before they got past chicken and mashed potatoes the men of the party came out of the awed silence that had fallen on them when Evie first came down in her finery, and began to make good Clay Creek wedding jokes, and ask for second helpings. Babe set up a screech when they tried to take the lily away from her, so they let her keep it and she sat in her high chair and held the flower above her head with one hand while she stuffed food into her mouth with the other.

After dinner the bridal couple and most of the guests went

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

out into the yard to take pictures. The groom carried the bride in his arms so that she would not soil her satin slippers that had cost her family half the price of a pig, and her youngest brother ran back to the stoop to get a prune box for her to stand on.

### IV

I went up to my room but I was not alone long before the bride came up with all her sisters in tow. They had come to help her change into her traveling suit. One of the sisters had brought her baby with her. She sat down on the edge of my bed and began to nurse him. "You sure are hungry," she said, spanking him playfully. "Had to wait a long time, didn't you?"

The other girls stood about handing Evie pieces of clothing, laughing and talking in loud happy voices. Babe whined at the door and I let her in. She put the lily behind her and looked sullenly about her, fearing she would be sent away.

"You don't realize how lucky you are," the one with the baby said, "to start in housekeeping with nothing to worry about but keeping house."

They all laughed at this, remembering.

"Never you mind," one of them said, "she'll have something to worry about, like as not, before the year is done."

Evie's head came up through the opening of a brown twill skirt. Her hair was mussed and I noticed that her eyes were not quite the Jeeter blue, but darker and steely.

"I will not," she said without smiling. "I won't have one this year, or the next, or the next."

One of the girls laughed rather uneasily. "You just think you won't," boomed the one with the baby. Evie slipped her arms into the blouse one of them held for her and put out a hand on either side waiting for the cuffs to be buttoned.

"No, I don't just *think* I won't," she said slowly. "I know good and well that I won't."

The room went silent, and the baby noticed, and let go his mother's breast with a loud smack, and lolled his head back on the thick arm that held him, and looked at Evie with wide-open

## A JEETER WEDDING

blue eyes. Babe, too, felt that something was wrong. She raised her cake-sticky face from my wrist where she had been listening to my watch, went to her mother, and thrust the paper lily up into her face. "Smell," she whined. "Pretty."

Lena took the lily in her red hands and tore it into pieces.

## Rachel\*

ERSKINE CALDWELL

*Erskine Caldwell is one of the startling new writers of the South. His work has a brutal power and a cruel realism in its portrayal of poor whites. He has published several novels and volumes of short stories, and his Tobacco Road has had a long and successful run on the New York stage.*

EVERY evening she came down through the darkness of the alley, emerging in the bright light of the street like the sudden appearance of a frightened child far from home. I knew that she had never reached the end of the alley before eight o'clock, and yet there were evenings when I ran there two hours early and waited beside the large green and red hydrant until she came. During all those months I had known her, she had been late only two or three times, and then it was only ten or fifteen minutes past eight when she came.

Rachel had never told me where she lived, and she would never let me walk home with her. Where the alley began, at the hydrant, was the door through which she came at eight, and the door which closed behind her at ten. When I had begged her to let me walk with her, she always pleaded with me, saying that her father did not allow her to be with boys and that if he should see us together he would either beat her unmercifully or make her leave home. For that reason I kept the promise I had given her, and I never went any farther than the entrance to the alley with her.

"I'll always come down to see you in the evening, Frank," she

\*From *We Are the Living*, by Erskine Caldwell. Copyright 1933. Published by The Viking Press, Inc., New York. Reprinted by permission of The Viking Press, Inc.

## RACHEL

said; and added hastily, "as long as you wish me to come. But you must remember your promise never to try to find where I live, nor walk home with me."

I promised again and again.

"Perhaps some day you can come to see me," she whispered, touching my arm, "but not now. You must never go beyond the hydrant until I tell you that you may."

Rachel had told me that almost every time I saw her, as if she wished to impress upon me the realization of some sort of danger that lay in the darkness of the alley. I knew there was no physical danger, because around the corner was our house and I was as familiar with the neighborhood as anyone else. And besides, during the day I usually walked through the alley to our back gate on my way home, because it was a short cut when I was late for supper. But after dark the alley was Rachel's, and I had never gone home that way at night for fear of what I might have seen or heard of her. I had promised her from the beginning that I would never follow her to find out where she lived, and that I would never attempt to discover her real name. The promise I had made was kept until the end.

I knew Rachel and her family were poor, because she had been wearing the same dress for nearly a year. It was a worn and fragile thing of faded blue cotton. I had never seen it soiled, and I knew she washed it every day. It had been mended time after time, carefully and neatly, and each evening when I saw her, I was worried because I knew that the weave of the cloth would not stand much more wear. I was constantly afraid that almost any day the dress would fall into shreds, and I dreaded for that time ever to come. I wished to offer to buy her a dress with the few dollars I had saved in my bank, but I was afraid to even suggest such a thing to her. I knew she would not have allowed me to give her the money, and I did not know what we would do when the dress became completely worn out. I was certain that it would mean the end of my seeing her. It was only the constant attention that she gave it and the care with

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

which she laundered it each day that could have kept the dress whole as long as it had been.

Once Rachel had worn a pair of black silk stockings. From the first she had come each night to the brightly lighted street in her white cotton stockings, and for a year she had worn no other kind. Then one evening she had on a pair of black silk ones.

The next evening I expected to see her wearing them again, but when she came out of the alley, she was wearing the stockings of white cotton. I did not ask her about it, because I had learned never to say anything that might hurt her feelings, but I was never able to understand why she wore black silk stockings just that one time. She may have borrowed them from her mother or sister, and there were dozens of other ways she could have got them, and yet none of the reasons I could think of ever seemed entirely conclusive. If I had asked her, perhaps she would have laughed, touched my arm as she did when we were together, and told me. But I was afraid to ask her. There were so many ways of making her feel badly, and of hurting her.

Each evening when she came out of the black alley I met her there, and together we walked down the brightly lighted street to the corner where there was a drug store. On the opposite corner there was a moving picture theater. To one or the other we went each evening. I should have liked to have taken her to both the show and to the drug store, but I was never able to earn enough money for both in the same evening. The twenty cents I received every day for delivering the afternoon paper on a house-to-house route was not enough to buy ice cream at the drug store and seats at the picture show, too. We had to take our choice between them.

When we stood on the corner across from the drug store and across from the theater, we could never decide at first whether to see the show or to eat ice cream. The good times we had there on the corner were just as enjoyable, to me, as anything else we did. Rachel would always try to make me tell her which I would rather do before she would commit herself. And of course I wished to do that which would please her the most.



## RACHEL

"I'm not going a step in either direction until you tell me which you would rather do," I would say to her. "It doesn't matter to me, because being with you is everything I wish for."

"I'll tell you what let's do, Frank," she said, touching my arm, and pretending not to be serious; "you go to the drug store, and I'll go to the movies."

That was Rachel's way of telling me which she preferred, although I didn't believe she ever suspected that I knew. But when she suggested that I go to the movies while she went to the drug store, I knew it to mean that she would much rather have a dish of ice cream that evening. The enjoyment of the show lasted for nearly two hours, while the ice cream could never be prolonged for more than half an hour, so all but two or three evenings a week we went to the theater across the street.

There was where I always wished to go, because in the semi-darkness we sat close together and I held her hand. And if the house was not filled, we always found two seats near the rear, in one of the two corners, and there I kissed her when we were sure no one was looking at us.

After the show was over, we went out into the bright street and walked slowly towards the green and red hydrant in the middle of the block. There at the entrance to the alley we stopped a while. If there were no other people in the street, I always put my arm around Rachel's waist while we walked slowly to the dark entrance. Neither of us spoke then, but I held her tighter to me, and she squeezed my fingers. When at last, after delaying as long as possible the time for her to go, we walked together a few steps into the darkness of the alley and stood in each other's arms, Rachel kissed me for the first time during the evening and I kissed her for as long a time as I had wished to in the theater. Still not speaking, we drew apart, our fingers interwoven and warm.

When she was about to disappear into the darkness of the alley, I ran to her and caught her hands in mine.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"I love you, Rachel," I told her, squeezing her fingers tighter and tighter as she withdrew them.

"And I love you, too, Frank," she said, turning and running into the alley out of sight for another day.

After waiting a while and listening until she had gone beyond hearing distance, I turned and walked slowly up the street towards home. Our house was only a block away: half a block to the corner, and another half-block from there. When I had reached my room, I went to the window and stood there looking out into the night and listening for some sound of her. My window faced the alley behind the house, and the street lights cast a dim glow over the housetops, but I could never see down into the darkness of the alley. After waiting at the window for an hour or more I undressed and went to bed. Many times I thought I heard the sound of her voice somewhere in the darkness, but after I had sprung from bed and had listened intently at the window for a long time I knew it was some other sound I had heard.

Near the end of summer I received a five-dollar gold piece as a birthday present from an aunt. As soon as I saw it, I began making plans for Rachel and me. I wished to surprise her that evening with the money, and then to take her downtown on a street car. First we would go to a restaurant, and afterward to one of the large theaters. We had never been downtown together, and it was the first time I had ever had more than fifty cents at one time. That afternoon as soon as I could deliver all the papers on my route, I ran home and began making all over again the plans I had for the evening.

Just before dark I went downstairs from my room to wait on the front porch for the time to come when I could meet Rachel. I sat on the porch steps, not even remembering to tell my mother that I was going downtown. She had never allowed me to go that far away from the house without first telling her where I was going, with whom, and at what time I would come back.

## RACHEL

I had been sitting on the porch steps for nearly an hour when my older sister came to the door and called me.

"We have a job for you, Frank," Nancy said. "Mother would like for you to come to the kitchen before you leave the house. Now, don't forget and go away."

I told her I would come right away. I was thinking then how much the surprise would mean to Rachel, and I did forget about the job waiting for me in the kitchen for nearly half an hour. It was then almost time for me to meet Rachel at the hydrant, and I jumped up and ran to the kitchen to finish the task as quickly as I could.

When I reached the kitchen, Nancy handed me a small round box and told me to open it and sprinkle the powder in the garbage can. I had heard my mother talking about the way rats were getting into the garbage so I went down to the back gate with the box without stopping to talk about it. As soon as I had sprinkled the powder on the refuse, I ran back into the house, found my cap, and ran down the street. I was angry with my sister for causing me to be late in meeting Rachel, even though the fault was my own for not having done the task sooner. I was certain, though, that Rachel would wait for me, even if I was a few minutes late in getting to the hydrant. I could not believe that she would come to the hydrant and leave immediately.

I had gone a dozen yards or more when I heard my mother calling me. I stopped unsteadily in my tracks.

"I'm going to the movies," I told her. "I'll be back soon."

"All right, Frank," she said. "I was afraid you were going downtown or somewhere like that. Come home as soon as you can."

I ran a few steps and stopped. I was so afraid that she would make me stay at home if I told her that I was going downtown, that I did not know what to do. I had never told her a lie, and I could not make myself start then. I looked back, and she was standing on the steps looking at me.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Mother, I am going downtown," I told her, "but I'll be back early."

Before she could call me again, I ran with all my might down the street, around the corner, and raced to the hydrant at the alley. Rachel was not within sight until I had reached it and had stood for a moment panting and blowing with excitement and exertion.

She was there though, waiting for me beside the fence, and she said she had just got there the second before. After we had started towards the corner where the drug store was, I took the gold piece from my watch pocket and showed it to her. She was even more excited than I had been when I first saw it. After she had looked at it a while, and had felt it in the palm of her hand, I told her what I had planned for us to do that evening.

We heard a street car coming, and we ran to the corner just in time to get aboard. The ride downtown was too fast, even though it took us nearly half an hour to get there. We got off near the theaters.

First I had planned for us to go to a small restaurant, and later to a show. Just as we were passing a drug store Rachel touched my arm.

"Please, Frank," she said, "I'm awfully thirsty. Won't you take me into that drug store and get me a glass of water?"

"If you must have a drink right away, I will," I said, "but can't you wait a minute more? There's a restaurant a few doors below here, and we can get a glass of water there while we're waiting for our supper to be served. If we lose much time we won't have the chance to see a complete show."

"I'm afraid I can't wait, Frank," she said, clutching my arm. "Please—please get me a glass of water. Quick!"

We went into the drug store and stood in front of the soda fountain. I asked the clerk for a glass of water. Rachel waited close beside me, clutching my arm tighter and tighter.

In front of us, against the wall, there was a large mirror. I could see ourselves plainly, but there was something about our reflection, especially Rachel's, that I had never been aware of

## RACHEL

before. It's true that we had never stood before a mirror until then, but I saw there something that had escaped me for a whole year. Rachel's beauty was revealed in a way that only a large mirror can show. The curve of her cheeks and lips was as beautiful as ever, and the symmetrical loveliness of her neck and arms was the same beauty I had worshiped hundreds of times before; but now for the first time I saw in the mirror before us a new and unrevealed charm in the sinuous grace of her breasts, beginning just below her shoulder and flowing with an expanding beauty down into the waist of her dress. I turned quickly and looked at her with my eyes, but though the softness of her breast was still there, I could not find the mirror's eyes to see the delicate growth which marked the flow that fell into the mysterious roundness rising from her body. I strained my eyes once more against the surface of the mirror, and once again I saw there the new sinuous beauty where her breasts began.

"Quick, Frank!" Rachel cried, clutching me desperately. "Water—please!"

I called to the clerk again, not looking, because I was afraid to take my eyes from the new beauty I saw in the mirror. I had never before seen such beauty in a woman. There was some mysterious reflection of light and shadow that had revealed the true loveliness of Rachel. The mirror had revealed in one short moment, like a flash of lightning in a dark room, the sinuous charm that had lain undiscovered and unseen during all the time I had known her. It was almost unbelievable that a woman, that Rachel, could possess such a new, and perhaps unique, beauty. My head reeled when the sensation enveloped me.

She clutched my arm again, breaking as one would a mirror, the reflection of my thoughts. The clerk had filled the glass with water and was handing it to her, but before he could place it in her hands, she had reached for it and had jerked it away from him. He looked as surprised as I was. Rachel had never before acted like that. Everything she did had always been perfect.

She grasped the glass as if she were squeezing it, and she swal-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

lowed the water in one gulp. Then she thrust the glass back towards the clerk, holding her throat with one hand, and screamed for more water. Before he could refill the glass, she had screamed again, even louder than before. People passing the door paused, and ran inside to see what was taking place. Others in the store ran up to us and stared at Rachel.

"What's the matter, Rachel?" I begged her, catching her wrists and shaking her. "Rachel, what's the matter?"

Rachel turned and looked at me. Her eyes were turned almost upside down, and her lips were swollen and dark. The expression on her face was horrible to see.

A prescription clerk came running towards us. He looked quickly at Rachel, and ran back to the rear of the store. By that time she had fallen forward against the marble fountain, and I caught her and held her to keep her from falling to the floor.

The prescription clerk again came running towards us, bringing a glass filled with a kind of milk-white fluid. He placed the glass to Rachel's lips, and forced the liquid down her throat.

"I'm afraid it's too late," he said. "If we had known ten minutes sooner we could have saved her."

"Too late?" I asked him. "Too late for what? What's the matter with her?"

"She's poisoned. It looks like rat poison to me. It's probably that, though it may be some other kind."

I could not believe anything that was being said, nor could I believe that what I saw was real.

Rachel did not respond to the antidote. She lay still in my arms, and her face was becoming more contorted and darker each moment.

"Quick! Back here!" the clerk said, shaking me.

Together we lifted her and ran with her to the rear of the store. The clerk had reached for a stomach pump, and was inserting the tube in her throat. Just as he was about to get the pump started, a physician ran between us and quickly examined Rachel. He stood up a moment later, motioning the other man and myself aside.

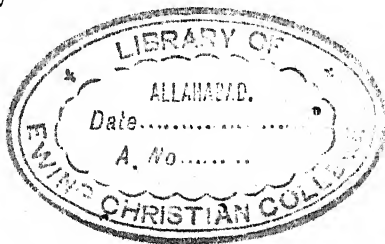
## RACHEL

"It's too late now," he said. "We might have been able to save her half an hour ago, but there is no heart action now, and breathing has stopped. She must have taken a whole box of poison—rat poison, I guess. It has already reached her heart and blood."

The clerk inserted the tube again and began working with the pump. The physician stood beside us all the time, giving instructions, but shaking his head. We forced stimulants down her throat and attempted to revive her by means of artificial respiration. During all of that time the doctor behind us was saying: "No, no. It's of no use. She's too far gone now. She'll never live again. She has enough rat poison in her system to kill ten men."

Some time later the ambulance came and took her away. I did not know where she was taken, and I did not try to find out. I sat in the little brown-paneled room surrounded by white-labeled bottles, looking at the prescription clerk who had tried so hard to save her. When at last I got up to go, the drug store was empty save for one clerk who looked at me disinterestedly. Outside in the street there was no one except a few taxi-drivers who never looked my way.

In a daze I started home through the deserted streets. The way was lonely, and tears blinded my eyes and I could not see the streets. I walked on. I could not see the lights and shadows of the streets, but I could see with a painful clarity the picture of Rachel, in a huge mirror, bending over our garbage can while the reflection of a unique beauty in her sinuous breasts burned in my brain and in my heart.



## Dr. Burney's Evening Party\*

VIRGINIA WOOLF

*Virginia Woolf is recognized as one of the foremost women novelists and critics of England. In her fiction she uses in a very interesting and convincing way the stream of consciousness, or interior monologue. Her writing is noted for its beauty and subtlety of style. Dr. Burney's Evening Party is not in her intricate manner, however, but is more direct and clear. It was taken from a volume of critical studies, but, nevertheless, contains a delectable short story.*

THE party was given either in 1777 or in 1778; on which day or month of the year is not known, but the night was cold. Fanny Burney, from whom we get much of our information, was accordingly either twenty-five or twenty-six, as we choose. But in order to enjoy the party to the full it is necessary to go back some years and to scrape acquaintance with the guests.

Fanny, from the earliest days, had always been fond of writing. There was a cabin at the end of her stepmother's garden at Kings' Lynn, where she used to sit and write of an afternoon till the oaths of the seamen sailing up and down the river drove her in. But it was only in the afternoon and in remote places that her half-suppressed, uneasy passion for writing had its way. Writing was held to be slightly ridiculous in a girl; rather unseemly in a woman. Besides, one never knew, if a girl kept a diary, whether she might not say something indiscreet—so Miss Dolly Young warned her; and Miss Dolly Young, though ex-

\* From *The Second Common Reader*, by Virginia Woolf. Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1934. Reprinted by permission of Virginia Woolf and Harcourt, Brace & Company.



ceedingly plain, was esteemed a woman of the highest character in Kings' Lynn. Fanny's stepmother also disapproved of writing. Yet so keen was the joy—"I cannot express the pleasure I have in writing down my thoughts at the very moment, and my opinion of people when I first see them"—that scribble she must. Loose sheets of paper fell from her pocket and were picked up and read by her father to her agony and shame; once she was forced to make a bonfire of all her papers in the back garden. At last some kind of compromise seems to have been arrived at. The morning was sacred to serious tasks like sewing; it was only in the afternoon that she allowed herself to scribble—letters, diaries, stories, verses in the look-out place which overhung the river, till the oaths of the sailors drove her in.

There was something strange in that, perhaps, for the eighteenth century was the age of oaths. Fanny's early diary is larded with them. "God help me," "Split me," "Stap my vitals," together with damns and develishes dropped daily and hourly from the lips of her adored father and her venerated Daddy Crisp. Perhaps Fanny's attitude to language was altogether a little abnormal. She was immensely susceptible to the power of words, but not nervously or acutely as Jane Austen was. She adored fluency and the sound of language pouring warmly and copiously over the printed page. Directly she read *Rasselas*, enlarged and swollen sentences formed on the tip of her childish pen in the manner of Dr. Johnson. Quite early in life she would go out of her way to avoid the plain name of Tomkins. Thus, whatever she heard from her cabin at the end of the garden was sure to affect her more than most girls, and it is also clear that while her ears were sensitive to sound, her soul was sensitive to meaning. There was something a little prudish in her nature. Just as she avoided the name of Tomkins, so she avoided the roughnesses, the asperities, the plainnesses of daily life. The chief fault that mars the extreme vivacity and vividness of the early diary is that the profusion of words tends to soften the edges of the sentences, and the sweetness of the sentiment to smooth out the outlines of the thought. Thus, when she heard the sailors

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

swearing, though Maria Allen, her half-sister, would, one believes, have liked to stay and toss a kiss over the water—her future history allows us to take the liberty of thinking so—Fanny went indoors.

Fanny went indoors, but not to solitary meditation. The house, whether in Lynn or London—and by far the greater part of the year was spent in Poland Street—hummed with activity. There was the sound of the harpsichord; the sound of singing; there was the sound—for such concentration seems to pervade a whole house with its murmur—of Dr. Burney writing furiously, surrounded by notebooks, in his study; and there were great bursts of chatter and laughter when, returning from their various occupations, the Burney children met together. Nobody enjoyed family life more than Fanny did. For there her shyness only served to fasten the nickname of Old Lady upon her; there she had a familiar audience for her humor; there she need not bother about her clothes; there—perhaps the fact that their mother had died when they were all young was partly the cause of it—was that intimacy which expresses itself in jokes and legends and a private language (“The wig is wet,” they would say, winking at each other): there were endless confabulations, and confidences between sisters and brothers and brothers and sisters. Nor could there be any doubt that the Burneys—Susan and James and Charles and Fanny and Hetty and Charlotte—were a gifted race. Charles was a scholar; James was a humorist; Fanny was a writer; Susan was musical—each had some special gift or characteristic to add to the common stock. And besides their natural gifts they were happy in the fact that their father, was a very popular man; a man, too, so admirably suited by his talents, which were social, and his birth, which was gentle, that they could mix without difficulty either with lords or with bookbinders, and had, in fact, as free a run of life as could be wished.

As for Dr. Burney, himself, there are some points about which, at this distance of time, one may feel dubious. It is difficult to be sure what, had one met him now, one would have felt for him. One thing is certain—one would have met him everywhere.

## DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY

Hostesses would be competing to catch him. Notes would wait for him. Telephone bells would interrupt him. For he was the most sought-after, the most occupied of men. He was always dashing in and dashing out. Sometimes he dined off a box of sandwiches in his carriage. Sometimes he went out at seven in the morning, and was not back from his round of music lessons till eleven at night. The "habitual softness of his manners," his great social charm, endeared him to everybody. His haphazard untidy ways—everything, notes, money, manuscripts, was tossed into a drawer, and he was robbed of all his savings once, but his friends were delighted to make it up for him; his odd adventures—did he not fall asleep after a bad crossing at Dover, and so return to France and so have to cross the Channel again?—gave him a claim upon people's kindness and sympathy. It is, perhaps, his diffuseness that makes him a trifle nebulous. He seems to be forever writing and then re-writing, and requiring his daughters to write for him, endless books and articles, while over him, unchecked, unfiled, unread perhaps, pour down notes, letters, invitations to dinner which he cannot destroy and means some day to annotate and collect, until he seems to melt away at last in a cloud of words. When he died at the age of eighty-eight, there was nothing to be done by the most devoted of daughters but to burn the whole accumulation entire. Even Fanny's love of language was suffocated. But if we fumble a little as to our feeling for Dr. Burney, Fanny certainly did not. She adored her father. She never minded how many times she had to lay aside her own writing in order to copy out his. And he returned her affection. Though his ambition for her success at Court was foolish, perhaps, and almost cost her her life, she had only to cry when a distasteful suitor was pressed on her, "Oh, Sir, I wish for nothing! Only let me live with you!" for the emotional doctor to reply, "My Life! Thou shalt live with me for ever if thou wilt. Thou canst not think I meant to get rid of thee?" And not only were his eyes full of tears, but what was more remarkable, he never mentioned Mr. Barlow again. Indeed, the Burneys were a happy family; a mixed, composite,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

oddly assorted family; for there were the Allens, too, and little half-brothers and half-sisters were being born and growing up.

So time passed, and the passage of the years made it impossible for the family to continue in Poland Street any longer. First they moved to Queen Square, and then, in 1774, to the house where Newton had lived, in St. Martin's Street, Leicester Fields; where his Observatory still stood, and his room with the painted panels was still to be seen. Here in a mean street, but in the centre of town, the Burneys set up their establishment. Here Fanny went on scribbling, stealing to the Observatory as she had stolen to the cabin at Lynn, for she exclaimed, "I cannot any longer resist what I find to be irresistible, the pleasure of popping down my thoughts from time to time upon paper." Here came so many famous people either to be closeted with the doctor, or, like Garrick, to sit with him while his fine head of natural hair was brushed, or to join the lively family dinner, or, more formally, to gather together in a musical party, where all the Burney children played and their father "dashed away" on the harpsichord, and perhaps some foreign musician of distinction performed a solo—so many people came for one reason or another to the house in St. Martin's Street that it is only the eccentrics, the grotesques, that catch the eye. One remembers, for instance, the Ajujari, the astonishing soprano, because she had been "mauled as an infant by a pig, in consequence of which she is reported to have a silver side." One remembers Bruce, the traveller, because he had a

most extraordinary complaint. When he attempted to speak, his whole stomach suddenly seemed to heave like an organ bellows. He did not wish to make any secret about it, but spoke of it as having originated in Abyssinia. However, one evening, when he appeared rather agitated, it lasted much longer than usual, and was so violent that it alarmed the company.

One seems to remember, for she paints herself while she paints the others, Fanny herself slipping eagerly and lightly in and out of all this company, with her rather prominent gnat-like eyes,

## DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY

and her shy, awkward manners. But the gnat-like eyes, the awkward manners, concealed the quickest observation, the most retentive memory. As soon as the company was gone, she stole to the Observatory and wrote down every word, every scene, in letters twelve pages long, for her beloved Daddy Crisp at Chessington. That old hermit—he had retired to a house in a field in dudgeon with society—though professing to be better pleased with a bottle of wine in his cellar and a horse in his stable, and a game of backgammon at night, than with all the fine company in the world, was always agog for news. He scolded his Fannikin if she did not tell him all about her fine goings-on. And he scolded her again if she did not write at full tilt exactly as the words came into her head.

Mr. Crisp wanted to know in particular "about Mr. Greville and his notions." For, indeed, Mr. Greville was a perpetual source of curiosity. It is a thousand pities that time with her poppy dust has covered Mr. Greville so that only his most prominent features, his birth, his person, and his nose emerge. Fulke Greville was the descendant—he must, one fancies, have emphasized the fact from the way in which it is repeated—of the friend of Sir Philip Sidney. A coronet, indeed, "hung almost suspended over his head." In person he was tall and well proportioned, "His face, features, and complexion were striking for masculine beauty." "His air and carriage were noble with conscious dignity"; his bearing was "lofty, yet graceful." But all these gifts and qualities, to which one must add that he rode and fenced and danced and played tennis to admiration, were marred by prodigious faults. He was supercilious in the extreme; he was selfish; he was fickle. He was a man of violent temper. His introduction to Dr. Burney in the first place was due to his doubt whether a musician could be fit company for a gentleman. When he found that young Burney not only played the harpsichord to perfection but curved his finger and rounded his hand as he played; that he answered plain "Yes, Sir," or "No, Sir," being more interested in the music than in his patron; that it was only indeed when Greville himself thrummed pertinaciously from

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

memory that he could stand it no longer, and broke into vivacious conversation—it was only when he found that young Burney was both gifted and well-bred that, being himself a very clever man, he no longer stood upon his dignity. Burney became his friend and his equal. Burney, indeed, almost became his victim. For if there was one thing that the descendant of the friend of Sir Philip Sidney detested it was what he called "fogrum." By that expressive word he seems to have meant the middle-class virtues of discretion and respectability, as opposed to the aristocratic virtues of what he called "*ton*." Life must be lived dashing, daringly, with perpetual display, even if the display was extremely expensive, and, as seemed possible to those who trailed dismally round his grounds praising the improvements, as boring to the man who made it as to the unfortunate guests whose admiration he insisted upon extorting. But Greville could not endure fogrum in himself or in his friends. He threw the obscure young musician into the fast life of White's and Newmarket, and watched with amusement to see if he sank or swam. Burney, most adroit of men, swam as if born to the water, and the descendant of the friend of Sir Philip Sidney was pleased. From being his protégé, Burney became his confidant. Indeed, the splendid gentleman, for all his high carriage, was in need of one. For Greville, could one wipe away the poppy dust that covers him, was one of those tortured and unhappy souls who find themselves torn asunder by opposite desires. On the one hand he was consumed with the wish to be in the first flight of fashion and to do "the thing," however costly or dreary "the thing" might be. On the other, he was secretly persuaded that "the proper bent of his mind and understanding was for metaphysics." Burney, perhaps, was a link between the world of *ton* and the world of fogrum. He was a man of breeding who could dice and bet with the bloods, he was also a musician who could talk of intellectual things and ask clever people to his house.

Thus Greville treated the Burneys as his equals, and came to their house, though his visits were often interrupted by the violent quarrels which he managed to pick even with the amiable

## DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY

Dr. Burney himself. Indeed, as time went on there was nobody with whom Greville did not quarrel. He had lost heavily at the gambling-tables. His prestige in society was sunk. His habits were driving his family from him. Even his wife, by nature gentle and conciliatory, though excessive thinness made her seem fitted to sit for a portrait "of a penetrating, puissant and sarcastic fairy queen," was wearied by his infidelities. Inspired by them she had suddenly produced that famous Ode to Indifference, "which had passed into every collection of fugitive pieces in the English language" and (it is Madam D'Arblay who speaks) "twined around her brow a garland of wide-spreading and unfading fragrance." Her fame, it may be, was another thorn in her husband's side; for he, too, was an author. He himself had produced a volume of *Maxims and Characters*; and having "waited for fame with dignity rather than anxiety, because with expectation unclogged with doubt," was beginning perhaps to become a little impatient when fame delayed. Meanwhile, he was fond of the society of clever people, and it was largely at his desire that the famous party in St. Martin's Street met together that very cold night.

### II

In those days, when London was so small, it was easier than now for people to stand on an eminence which they scarcely struggled to keep, but enjoyed by unanimous consent. Everybody knew and remembered when they saw her that Mrs. Greville had written an Ode to Indifference; everybody knew that Mr. Bruce had travelled in Abyssinia; so, too, everybody knew that there was a house at Streatham presided over by a lady called Mrs. Thrale. Without troubling to write an Ode, without hazarding her life among savages, without possessing either high rank or vast wealth, Mrs. Thrale was a celebrity. By the exercise of powers difficult to define—for to feel them one must have sat at table and noticed a thousand audacities and deftnesses and skilful combinations which die with the moment—Mrs. Thrale had the reputation of a great hostess. Her fame spread far be-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

yond her house. People who had never seen her discussed her. People wanted to know what she was like; whether she was really so witty and so well read; whether she had a heart; whether she loved her husband the brewer, who seemed a dull dog; why she had married him; whether Dr. Johnson was in love with her—what, in short, was the truth of her story, the secret of her power. For power she had—that was indisputable.

Even then perhaps, it would have been difficult to say in what it consisted. For she possessed the one quality which can never be named; she enjoyed the one gift which never ceases to excite discussion. Somehow or other she was a personality. The young Burneys, for instance, had never seen Mrs. Thrale or been to Streatham, but the stir which she set going around her had reached them in St. Martin's Street. When their father came back from giving his first music lesson to Miss Thrale at Streatham they flocked about him to hear his account of her mother. Was she as brilliant as people made out? Was she kind? Was she cruel? Had he liked her? Dr. Burney was in high good temper—in itself a proof of his hostess' power—and he replied, not, we may be sure, as Fanny rendered it, that she was a "star of the first constellation of female wits: surpassing, rather than equalising the reputation which her extraordinary endowments, and the splendid fortune which made them conspicuous, had blazoned abroad"—that was written when Fanny's style was old and tarnished, and its leaves were fluttering and falling profusely to the ground; the doctor, we may suppose, answered briskly that he had enjoyed himself hugely; that the lady was a very clever lady; that she had interrupted the lesson all the time; that she had a very sharp tongue—there was no doubt of that; but he would go to the stake for it that she was a good-hearted woman at the bottom. Then they must have pressed to know what she looked like. She looked younger than her age—which was about forty. She was rather plump, very small, fair with very blue eyes, and had a scar or cut on her lip. She painted her cheeks, which was unnecessary, because her complexion was rosy by nature. The whole impression she made was one of bustle and gaiety



## DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY

and good temper. She was, he said, a woman "full of sport," whom nobody could have taken for a creature that the doctor could not bear, a learned lady. Less obviously, she was very observant, as her anecdotes were to prove; capable of passion, though that was not yet visible at Streatham; and, while curiously careless and good-tempered about her duties as a wit or a blue-stocking, had an amusing pride in being descended from a long line of Welsh gentry (while the Thrales were obscure), and drew satisfaction now and then from the reflection, that in her veins ran the blood, as the College of Heralds acknowledged, of Adam of Salzburg.

Many women might have possessed these qualities without being remembered for them. Mrs. Thrale possessed besides one which has given her immortality: the power of being the friend of Dr. Johnson. Without that addition, her life might have fizzled and flamed to extinction, leaving nothing behind it. But the combination of Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale created something as solid, as lasting, as remarkable in its way as a work of art. And this was an achievement that called for much rarer powers on the part of Mrs. Thrale than the qualities of a good hostess. When the Thrales first met Johnson he was in a state of profound gloom, crying out such lost and terrible words that Mr. Thrale put his hand before his mouth to silence him. Physically, too, he was afflicted with asthma and dropsy; his manners were rough; his habits were gross; his clothes were dirty; his wig was singed; his linen was soiled; and he was the rudest of men. Yet Mrs. Thrale carried this monster off with her to Brighton and then domesticated him in her house at Streatham, where he was given a room to himself, and where he spent habitually some days in the middle of every week. This might have been, it is true, but the enthusiasm of a curiosity hunter, ready to put up with a host of disagreeables for the sake of having at her house the original Dr. Johnson, whom anybody in England would gladly pay to see. But it is clear that her connoisseurship was of a finer type. She understood—her anecdotes prove it—that Dr. Johnson was somehow a rare, an important, an impressive

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

human being whose friendship might be a burden but was certainly an honor. And it was not by any means so easy to know this then as it is now. What one knew then was that Dr. Johnson was coming to dinner. And when Dr. Johnson was coming to dinner one had to ask one's self who was coming too? For if it was a Cambridge man there might be an outburst. If it was a Whig there would certainly be a scene. If it was a Scotsman anything might happen. Such were his whims and prejudices. Next one would have to bethink one, what food had been ordered for dinner? For the food never went uncriticised; and even when one had provided him with young peas from the garden, one must not praise them. Were not the young peas charming? Mrs. Thrale asked once, and he turned upon her, after gobbling down masses of pork and veal pie with lumps of sugar in it, and snapped "Perhaps they would be so—to a pig." Then what would the talk be about—that was another cause for anxiety. If it got upon painting or music he was apt to dismiss it with scorn, for both arts were indifferent to him. Then if a traveller told a tale he was sure to pooh-pooh it, because he believed nothing that he had not seen himself. Then if any one were to express sympathy in his presence it might well draw down upon one a rebuke for insincerity:

When, one day, I lamented the loss of a cousin killed in America: "Prithee, my dear," said he, "have done with canting: how would the world be the worse for it, I may ask, if all your relations were at once spitted like larks, and roasted for Presto's supper?"

In short, the meal would be strewn with difficulties; the whole affair might run upon the rocks at any moment.

Had Mrs. Thrale been a shallow curiosity hunter she would have shown him for a season or so and then let him drop. But Mrs. Thrale realised even at the moment that one must submit to be snubbed and bullied and irritated and offended by Dr. Johnson because—well, what was the force that sent an impudent and arrogant young man like Boswell slinking back to his chair like a beaten boy when Johnson bade him? Why did she herself

## DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY

sit up till four in the morning pouring out tea for him? There was a force in him that awed even a competent woman of the world, that subdued even a thick-skinned and conceited boy. He had a right to scold Mrs. Thrale for inhumanity, when she knew that he spent only seventy pounds a year on himself and with the rest of his income supported a houseful of decrepit and ungrateful lodgers. If he gobbled at table and tore the peaches from the wall, he went back punctually to London to see, that his wretched inmates had their three good meals over the week-end. Moreover, he was a warehouse of knowledge. If the dancing-master talked about dancing, Johnson could out-talk him. He could keep one amused by the hour with his tales of the underworld, of the toppers and scallywags who haunted his lodgings and claimed his bounty. He said things casually that one never forgot. But what was perhaps more engaging than all this learning and virtue, was his love of pleasure, his detestation of the mere bookworm, his passion for life and society. And then, as a woman would, Mrs. Thrale loved him for his courage—that he had separated two fierce dogs that were tearing each other to pieces in Mr. Beauclerc's sitting-room; that he had thrown a man, chair and all, into the pit of a theatre; that, blind and twitching as he was, he rode to hounds on Brightelmstone Downs, and followed the hunt as if he had been a gay dog instead of a huge and melancholy old man. Moreover, there was a natural affinity between them. She drew him out: she made him say what without her he would never have said; indeed, he had confessed to her some painful secret of his youth which she never revealed to anybody. Above all, they shared the same passion. Of talk, they could neither of them ever have enough.

Thus Mrs. Thrale could always be counted on to produce Dr. Johnson; and it was, of course, Dr. Johnson whom Mr. Greville most particularly wished to meet. As it happened, Dr. Burney had renewed his acquaintance with Dr. Johnson after many years, when he went to Streatham to give his first music lesson, and Dr. Johnson had been there, "wearing his mildest aspect." For he remembered Dr. Burney with kindness. He remembered

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

a letter that Dr. Burney had written him in praise of the dictionary; he remembered, too, that Dr. Burney, having called upon him, years ago, and found him out, had dared to cut some bristles from the hearth broom to send to an admirer. When he met Dr. Burney again at Streatham, he had instantly taken a liking to him; soon he was brought by Mrs. Thrale to see Dr. Burney's books; it was quite easy, therefore, for Dr. Burney to arrange that on a certain night in the early spring of 1777 or 1778, Mr. Greville's great wish to meet Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale should be gratified. A day was fixed and the engagement was made.

Whatever the day was it must have been marked in the host's calendar with a note of interrogation. Anything might happen. Any extreme of splendor or disaster might spring from the meeting of so many marked and distinguished characters. Dr. Johnson was formidable. Mr. Greville was domineering. Mrs. Greville was a celebrity in one way; Mrs. Thrale was a celebrity in another. Then it was an occasion. Everybody felt it to be so. Wits would be on the strain; expectation on tiptoe. Dr. Burney foresaw these difficulties and took steps to avert them, but there was, one vaguely feels, something a little obtuse about Dr. Burney. The eager, kind, busy man, with his head full of music and his desk stuffed with notes, lacked discrimination. The precise outline of people's characters was covered with a rambling pink haze. To his innocent mind music was the universal specific. Everybody must share his own enthusiasm for music. If there was going to be any difficulty, music could solve it. He therefore asked Signor Piozzi to be of the party.

The night arrived and the fire was lit. The chairs were placed and the company arrived. As Dr. Burney had foreseen, the awkwardness was great. Things indeed seemed to go wrong from the start. Dr. Johnson had come in his worsted wig, very clean and prepared evidently for enjoyment. But after one look at him, Mr. Greville seemed to decide that there was something formidable about the old man; it would be better not to compete; it would be better to play the fine gentleman, and leave it

## DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY

to literature to make the first advances. Murmuring, apparently, something about having the toothache, Mr. Greville "assumed his most supercilious air of distant superiority and planted himself, immovable as a noble statue, upon the hearth." He said nothing. Then Mrs. Greville, though longing to distinguish herself, judged it proper for Dr. Johnson to begin, so that she said nothing. Mrs. Thrale, who might have been expected to break up the solemnity, felt, it seemed, that the party was not her party, and, waiting for the principals to engage, resolved to say nothing either. Mrs. Crewe, the Grevilles' daughter, lovely and vivacious as she was, had come to be entertained and instructed and therefore very naturally she, too, said nothing. Nobody said anything. Complete silence reigned. Here was the very moment for which Dr. Burney in his wisdom had prepared. He nodded to Signor Piozzi; and Signor Piozzi stepped to the instrument and began to sing. Accompanying himself on the pianoforte, he sang an *aria parlante*. He sang beautifully, he sang his best. But far from breaking the awkwardness or loosing the tongues, the music increased the constraint. Nobody spoke. Everybody waited for Dr. Johnson to begin. There, indeed, they showed their fatal ignorance, for if there was one thing that Dr. Johnson never did, it was to begin. Somebody had always to start a topic before he consented to pursue it or to demolish it. Now he waited in silence to be challenged. But he waited in vain. Nobody spoke. Nobody dared speak. The roulades of Signor Piozzi continued uninterrupted. As he saw his chance of a pleasant evening's talk drowned in the rattle of a piano, Dr. Johnson sank into silent abstraction and sat with his back to the piano gazing at the fire. The *aria parlante* continued uninterrupted. At last the strain became unendurable. At last Mrs. Thrale could stand it no longer. It was the attitude of Mr. Greville, apparently, that roused her resentment. There he stood on the hearth in front of the fire "staring around him at the whole company in curious silence sardonically." What right had he, even if he were the descendant of the friend of Sir Philip Sidney, to despise the company and absorb the fire? Her own pride of ancestry sud-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

denly asserted itself. Did not the blood of Adam of Salzburg run in her veins? Was it not as blue as that of the Grevilles and far more sparkling? Giving rein to the spirit of recklessness which sometimes bubbled in her, she rose, and stole on tiptoe to the pianoforte. Signor Piozzi was still singing and accompanying himself dramatically as he sang. She began a ludicrous mimicry of his gestures; she shrugged her shoulders, she cast up her eyes, she reclined her head on one side just as he did. At this singular display the company began to titter—indeed, it was a scene that was to be described “from coterie to coterie throughout London, with comments and sarcasms of endless variety.” People who saw Mrs. Thrale at her mockery that night never forgot that this was the beginning of that criminal affair, the first scene of that “most extraordinary drama” which lost Mrs. Thrale the respect of friends and children, which drove her in ignominy from England, and scarcely allowed her to show herself in London again—this was the beginning of her most reprehensible, her most unnatural passion for one who was not only a musician but a foreigner. But all this still lay on the laps of the gods. Nobody yet knew of what iniquity the vivacious lady was capable. She was still the respected wife of a wealthy brewer. Happily, Dr. Johnson was staring at the fire, and knew nothing of the scene at the piano. But Dr. Burney put a stop to the laughter instantly. He was shocked that a guest, even if a foreigner and a musician, should be ridiculed behind his back, and stealing to Mrs. Thrale he whispered quietly but with authority in her ear that if she had no taste for music herself she should consider the feelings of those who had. Mrs. Thrale took the rebuke with admirable sweetness, nodded her acquiescence, and returned to her chair. But she had done her part. After that nothing more could be expected from her. Let them now do what they chose—she washed her hands of it, and seated herself “like a pretty little Miss,” as she said afterwards, to endure what yet remained to be endured “of one of the most humdrum evenings that she had ever passed.”

If no one had dared to tackle Dr. Johnson at the beginning it

## DR. BURNEY'S EVENING PARTY

was scarcely likely that they would dare now. He had apparently decided that the evening was a failure so far as talk was concerned. If he had not come dressed in his best clothes he might have had a book in his pocket which he could have pulled out and read. As it was, nothing but the resources of his own mind were left him; but these were huge; and these he explored as he sat with his back to the piano looking the very image of gravity, dignity, and composure.

At last the *aria parlante* came to an end. Signor Piozzi indeed, finding nobody to talk to, fell asleep in his solitude. Even Dr. Burney by this time must have been aware that music is not an infallible specific; but there was nothing for it now. Since people would not talk, the music must continue. He called upon his daughters to sing a duet. And then when that was over, there was nothing for it but that they must sing another. Signor Piozzi still slept, or still feigned sleep. Dr. Johnson explored still further the magnificent resources of his own mind. Mr. Greville still stood superciliously upon the hearth-rug. And the night was cold.

But it was a grave mistake to suppose that because Dr. Johnson was apparently lost in thought, and certainly almost blind, he was not aware of anything, particularly of anything reprehensible, that was taking place in the room. His "starts of vision" were always astonishing and almost always painful. So it was on the present occasion. He suddenly woke up. He suddenly roused himself. He suddenly uttered the words for which the company had been waiting all evening.

"If it were not for depriving the ladies of the fire," he said, looking fixedly at Mr. Greville, "I should like to stand upon the hearth myself!" The effect of the outburst was prodigious. The Burney children said afterwards that it was as good as a comedy. The descendant of the friend of Sir Philip Sidney quailed before the Doctor's glance. All the blood of all the Brookes rallied itself to overcome the insult. The son of a bookseller should be taught his place. Greville did his best to smile—a faint, scoffing smile. He did his best to stand where he had

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

stood the whole evening. He stood smiling, he stood trying to smile, for two or perhaps three minutes more. But when he looked around the room and saw all eyes cast down, all faces twitching with amusement, all sympathies plainly on the side of the bookseller's son, he could stand there no longer. Fulke Greville slunk away, sloping even his proud shoulders, to a chair. But as he went, he rang the bell "with force." He demanded his carriage.

"The party then broke up; and no one from amongst it ever asked, or wished for its repetition."



## Hold 'em, Yale\*

DAMON RUNYON

*Damon Runyon was born in Manhattan, Kansas? In his stories he celebrates the drama and comedy of another, better known, Manhattan. He has had a colorful career as sports columnist and feature writer, as newspaper reporter in Colorado and California, as sports writer in New York, and as war correspondent in Mexico and in Europe. He has published volumes of poems and of short stories, but as a frequent contributor to magazines he is better known as one of the most popular and highest paid fiction writers of our day. From some of his stories have been adapted highly successful motion pictures. The sports story is too often a conventional type, seldom original, but Runyon's narratives of gangsters, "dolls," and similar contemporary types, have a humor all their own.*

WHAT I am doing in New Haven on the day of a very large football game between the Harvards and the Yales is something which calls for quite a little explanation, because I am not such a guy as you will expect to find in New Haven at any time, and especially on the day of a large football game.

But there I am, and the reason I am there goes back to a Friday night when I am sitting in Mindy's restaurant on Broadway thinking of very little except how I can get hold of a few potatoes to take care of the old overhead. And while I am sitting there, who comes in but Sam the Gonoph, who is a ticket speculator by trade, and who seems to be looking all around and about.

\* From *Blue-Plate Special*, by Damon Runyon. Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1934. Reprinted by permission of Damon Runyon and Frederick A. Stokes Company.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Well, Sam the Gonoph gets to talking to me, and it turns out that he is looking for a guy by the name of Gigolo Georgie, who is called Gigolo Georgie because he is always hanging around night clubs wearing a little mustache and white spats, and dancing with old dolls. In fact, Gigolo Georgie is nothing but a gentleman bum, and I am surprised that Sam the Gonoph is looking for him.

But it seems that the reason Sam the Gonoph wishes to find Gigolo Georgie is to give him a good punch in the snoot, because it seems that Gigolo Georgie promotes Sam for several duckets to the large football game between the Harvards and the Yales to sell on commission, and never kicks back anything whatever to Sam. Naturally Sam considers Gigolo Georgie nothing but a rascal for doing such a thing to him, and Sam says he will find Gigolo Georgie and give him a going-over if it is the last act of his life.

Well, then Sam explains to me that he has quite a few nice duckets for the large football game between the Harvards and the Yales and that he is taking a crew of guys with him to New Haven the next day to hustle these duckets, and what about me going along and helping to hustle these duckets and making a few bobs for myself, which is an invitation that sounds very pleasant to me, indeed.

Now of course it is very difficult for anybody to get nice duckets to a large football game between the Harvards and the Yales unless they are personally college guys, and Sam the Gonoph is by no means a college guy. In fact, the nearest Sam ever comes to a college is once when he is passing through the yard belonging to the Princetons, but Sam is on the fly at the time as a gendarme is after him, so he does not really see much of the college.

But every college guy is entitled to duckets to a large football game with which his college is connected, and it is really surprising how many college guys do not care to see large football games even after they get their duckets, especially if a ticket spec such as Sam the Gonoph comes along offering them a few

## HOLD 'EM, YALE

bobs more than the duckets are worth. I suppose this is because a college guy figures he can see a large football game when he is old, while many things are taking place around and about that it is necessary for him to see while he is young enough to really enjoy them, such as the Follies.

Anyway, many college guys are always willing to listen to reason when Sam the Gonoph comes around offering to buy their duckets, and then Sam takes these duckets and sells them to customers for maybe ten times the price the duckets call for, and in this way Sam does very good for himself.

I know Sam the Gonoph for maybe twenty years, and always he is speculating in duckets of one kind and another. Sometimes it is duckets for the world's series, and sometimes for big fights, and sometimes it is duckets for nothing but lawn-tennis games, although why anybody wishes to see such a thing as lawn tennis is always a very great mystery to Sam the Gonoph and everybody else.

But in all those years I see Sam dodging around under the feet of the crowds at these large events, or running through the special trains offering to buy or sell duckets, I never hear of Sam personally attending any of these events except maybe a baseball game, or a fight, for Sam has practically no interest in anything but a little profit on his duckets.

He is a short, chunky, black-looking guy with a big beezzer, and he is always sweating even on a cold day, and he comes from down around Essex Street, on the lower East Side. Moreover, Sam the Gonoph's crew generally comes from the lower East Side, too, for as Sam goes along he makes plenty of potatoes for himself and branches out quite some, and has a lot of assistants hustling duckets around these different events.

When Sam is younger, the cops consider him hard to get along with, and in fact his monicker, the Gonoph, comes from his young days down on the lower East Side, and I hear it is Yiddish for thief, but of course as Sam gets older and starts gathering plenty of potatoes, he will not think of stealing any-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

thing. At least not much, and especially if it is anything that is nailed down.

Well, anyway, I meet Sam the Gonoph and his crew at the information desk in the Grand Central the next morning, and this is how I came to be in New Haven on the day of the large football game between the Harvards and the Yales.

For such a game as this, Sam has all his best hustlers, including such as Jew Louie, Nubbsy Taylor, Benny South Street and old Liverlips, and to look at these parties you will never suspect that they are top-notch ducket hustlers. The best you will figure them is a lot of guys who are not to be met up with in a dark alley, but then ducket-hustling is a rough-and-tumble dodge and it will scarcely be good policy to hire female impersonators.

Now while we are hustling these duckets out around the main gates of the Yale Bowl I notice a very beautiful little doll of maybe sixteen or seventeen standing around watching the crowd, and I can see she is waiting for somebody, as many dolls often do at football games. But I can also see that this little doll is very much worried as the crowd keeps going in, and it is getting on toward game time. In fact, by and by I can see this little doll has tears in her eyes and if there is anything I hate to see it is tears in a doll's eyes.

So finally I go over to her, and I say as follows:

"What is eating you, little Miss?"

"Oh," she says, "I am waiting for Elliot. He is to come up from New York and meet me here to take me to the game, but he is not here yet, and I am afraid something happens to him. Furthermore," she says, the tears in her eyes getting very large, indeed, "I am afraid I will miss the game because he has my ticket."

"Why," I say, "this is a very simple proposition. I will sell you a choice ducket for only a sawbuck, which is ten dollars in your language, and you are getting such a bargain only because the game is about to begin, and the market is going down."

"But," she says, "I do not have ten dollars. In fact, I have only fifty cents left in my purse, and this is worrying me very much,

## HOLD 'EM, YALE

for what will I do if Elliot does not meet me? You see," she says, "I come from Miss Peevy's school at Worcester, and I only have enough money to pay my railroad fare here, and of course I cannot ask Miss Peevy for any money as I do not wish her to know I am going away."

Well, naturally all this is commencing to sound to me like a hard-luck story such as any doll is apt to tell, so I go on about my business because I figure she will next be trying to put the lug on me for a ducket, or maybe for her railroad fare back to Worcester, although generally dolls with hard-luck stories live in San Francisco.

She keeps on standing there, and I notice she is now crying more than somewhat, and I get to thinking to myself that she is about as cute a little doll as I ever see although too young for anybody to be bothering much about. Furthermore, I get to thinking that maybe she is on the level, at that, with her story.

Well, by this time the crowd is nearly all in the Bowl, and only a few parties such as coppers and hustlers of one kind and another are left standing outside, and there is much cheering going on inside, when Sam the Gonoph comes up looking very much disgusted, and speaks as follows:

"What do you think?" Sam says. "I am left with seven duckets on my hands, and these guys around here will not pay as much as face value for them, and they stand me better than three bucks over that. Well," Sam says, "I am certainly not going to let them go for less than they call for if I have to eat them. What do you guys say we use these duckets ourselves and go in and see the game? Personally," Sam says, "I often wish to see one of these large football games just to find out what makes suckers willing to pay so much for duckets."

Well, this seems to strike one and all, including myself, as a great idea, because none of the rest of us ever see a large football game either, so we start for the gate, and as we pass the little doll who is still crying, I say to Sam the Gonoph like this:

"Listen, Sam," I say, "you have seven duckets, and we are only six, and here is a little doll who is stood up by her guy, and

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

has no ducket, and no potatoes to buy one with, so what about taking her with us?"

Well, this is all right with Sam the Gonoph, and none of the others object, so I step up to the little doll and invite her to go with us, and right away she stops crying and begins smiling, and saying we are very kind indeed. She gives Sam the Gonoph an extra big smile, and right away Sam is saying she is very cute, indeed, and then she gives old Liverlips an even bigger smile, and what is more she takes old Liverlips by the arm and walks with him, and old Liverlips is not only very much astonished, but very much pleased. In fact, old Liverlips begins stepping out very spry, and Liverlips is not such a guy as cares to have any part of dolls, young or old.

But while walking with old Liverlips, the little doll talks very friendly to Jew Louie and to Nubbsy Taylor and Benny South Street, and even to me, and by and by you will think to see us that we are all her uncles, although of course if this little doll really knows who she is with, the chances are she will start chucking faints one after the other.

Anybody can see that she has very little experience in this wicked old world, and in fact is somewhat rattle-headed, because she gabs away very freely about her personal business. In fact, before we are in the Bowl she lets it out that she runs away from Miss Peevy's school to elope with this Elliot, and she says the idea is they are to be married in Hartford after the game. In fact, she says Elliot wishes to go to Hartford and be married before the game.

"But," she says, "my brother John is playing substitute with the Yales to-day, and I cannot think of getting married to anybody before I see him play, although I am much in love with Elliot. He is a wonderful dancer," she says, "and very romantic. I meet him in Atlantic City last summer. Now we are eloping," she says, "because my father does not care for Elliot whatever. In fact, my father hates Elliot, although he only sees him once, and it is because he hates Elliot so that my father sends me to

## HOLD 'EM, YALE

Miss Peevy's school in Worcester. She is an old pill. Do you not think my father is unreasonable?" she says.

Well, of course none of us have any ideas on such propositions as this, although old Liverlips tells the little doll he is with her right or wrong, and pretty soon we are inside the Bowl and sitting in seats as good as any in the joint. It seems we are on the Harvards' side of the field, although of course I will never know this if the little doll does not mention it.

She seems to know everything about this football business, and as soon as we sit down she tries to point out her brother playing substitute for the Yales, saying he is the fifth guy from the end among a bunch of guys sitting on a bench on the other side of the field all wrapped in blankets. But we cannot make much of him from where we sit, and anyway it does not look to me as if he has much of a job.

It seems we are right in the middle of all the Harvards and they are making an awful racket, what with yelling, and singing, and one thing and another, because it seems the game is going on when we get in, and that the Harvards are shoving the Yales around more than somewhat. So our little doll lets everybody know she is in favor of the Yales by yelling, "Hold 'em, Yale!"

Personally, I cannot tell which are the Harvards and which are the Yales at first, and Sam the Gonoph and the others are as dumb as I am, but she explains the Harvards are wearing the red shirts and the Yales the blue shirts, and by and by we are yelling for the Yales to hold 'em, too, although of course it is only on account of our little doll wishing the Yales to hold 'em, and not because any of us care one way or the other.

Well, it seems that the idea of a lot of guys and a little doll getting right among them and yelling for the Yales to hold 'em is very repulsive to the Harvards around us, although any of them must admit it is very good advice to the Yales, at that, and some of them start making cracks of one kind and another, especially at our little doll. The chances are they are very jealous because she is out-yelling them, because I will say one

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

thing for our little doll, she can yell about as loud as anybody I ever hear, male or female.

A couple of Harvards sitting in front of old Liverlips are imitating our little doll's voice, and making guys around them laugh very heartily, but all of a sudden these parties leave their seats and go away in great haste, their faces very pale, indeed, and I figure maybe they are both taken sick at the same moment, but afterwards I learn that Liverlips takes a big shiv out of his pocket and opens it and tells them very confidentially that he is going to carve their ears off.

Naturally, I do not blame the Harvards for going away in great haste, for Liverlips is such a looking guy as you will figure to take great delight in carving off ears. Furthermore, Nubbsy Taylor and Benny South Street and Jew Louie and even Sam the Gonoph commence exchanging such glances with other Harvards around us who are making cracks at our little doll that presently there is almost a dead silence in our neighborhood, except for our little doll yelling, "Hold 'em, Yale!" You see by this time we are all very fond of our little doll because she is so cute looking and has so much zing in her, and we do not wish anybody making cracks at her or at us either, and especially at us.

In fact, we are so fond of her that when she happens to mention that she is a little chilly, Jew Louie and Nubbsy Taylor slip around among the Harvards and come back with four steamer rugs, six mufflers, two pairs of gloves, and a thermos bottle full of hot coffee for her, and Jew Louie says if she wishes a mink coat to just say the word. But she already has a mink coat. Furthermore, Jew Louie brings her a big bunch of red flowers that he finds on a doll with one of the Harvards, and he is much disappointed when she says it is the wrong color for her.

Well, finally the game is over, and I do not remember much about it, although afterwards I hear that our little doll's brother John plays substitute for the Yaks very good. But it seems that the Harvards win, and our little doll is very sad indeed about



## HOLD 'EM, YALE

this, and is sitting there looking out over the field, which is now covered with guys dancing around as if they all suddenly go daffy, and it seems they are all Harvards, because there is really no reason for the Yales to do any dancing.

All of a sudden our little doll looks toward one end of the field, and says as follows:

"Oh, they are going to take our goal posts!"

Sure enough, a lot of the Harvards are gathering around the posts at this end of the field, and are pulling and hauling at the posts, which seem to be very stout posts, indeed. Personally, I will not give you eight cents for these posts, but afterwards one of the Yales tells me that when a football team wins a game it is considered the proper caper for this team's boosters to grab the other guy's goal posts. But he is not able to tell me what good the posts are after they get them, and this is one thing that will always be a mystery to me.

Anyway, while we are watching the goings-on around the goal posts, our little doll says come on and jumps up and runs down an aisle and out onto the field, and into the crowd around the goal posts, so naturally we follow her. Somehow she manages to wiggle through the crowd of Harvards around the posts, and the next thing anybody knows she shins up one of the posts faster than you can say scat, and pretty soon is roosting out on the cross-bar between the posts like a chipmunk.

Afterwards she explains that her idea is the Harvards will not be ungentlemanly enough to pull down the goal posts with a lady roosting on them, but it seems these Harvards are no gentlemen, and keep on pulling, and the posts commence to teeter, and our little doll is teetering with them, although of course she is in no danger if she falls because she is sure to fall on the Harvards' noggins, and the way I look at it, the noggin of anybody who will be found giving any time to pulling down goal posts is apt to be soft enough to break a very long fall.

Now Sam the Gonoph and old Liverlips and Nubbsy Taylor and Benny South Street and Jew Louie and I reach the crowd

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

around the goal posts at about the same time, and our little doll sees us from her roost and yells to us as follows:

"Do not let them take our posts!"

Well, about this time one of the Harvards who seems to be about nine feet high reaches over six other guys and hits me on the chin and knocks me so far that when I pick myself up I am pretty well out of the way of everybody and have a chance to see what is going on.

Afterwards somebody tells me that the guy probably thinks I am one of the Yales coming to the rescue of the goal posts but I wish to say I will always have a very low opinion of college guys, because I remember two other guys punch me as I am going through the air, unable to defend myself.

Now Sam the Gonoph and Nubbsy Taylor and Jew Louie and Benny South Street and old Liverlips somehow manage to ease their way through the crowd until they are under the goal posts, and our little doll is much pleased to see them, because the Harvards are now making the posts teeter more than somewhat with their pulling, and it looks as if the posts will go any minute.

Of course Sam the Gonoph does not wish any trouble with these parties, and he tries to speak nicely to the guys who are pulling at the posts, saying as follows:

"Listen," Sam says, "the little doll up there does not wish you to take these posts."

Well, maybe they do not hear Sam's words in the confusion, or if they do hear them they do not wish to pay any attention to them for one of the Harvards mashes Sam's derby hat down over his eyes, and another smacks old Liverlips on the left ear, while Jew Louie and Nubbsy Taylor and Benny South Street are shoved around quite some.

"All right," Sam the Gonoph says, as soon as he can pull his hat off his eyes, "all right, gentlemen, if you wish to play this way. Now, boys, let them have it!"

So Sam the Gonoph and Nubbsy Taylor and Jew Louie and Benny South Street and old Liverlips begin letting them have

## HOLD 'EM, YALE

it, and what they let them have it with is not only their dukes, but with the good old difference in their dukes, because these guys are by no means suckers when it comes to a battle, and they all carry something in their pockets to put in their dukes in case of a fight, such as a dollar's worth of nickels rolled up tight.

Furthermore, they are using the old leather, kicking guys in the stomach when they are not able to hit them on the chin, and Liverlips is also using his noodle to good advantage, grabbing guys by their coat lapels and yanking them into him so he can butt them between the eyes with his noggin, and I wish to say that old Liverlips' noggin is a very dangerous weapon at all times.

Well, the ground around them is soon covered with Harvards, and it seems that some Yales are also mixed up with them, being Yales who think Sam the Gonoph and his guys are other Yales defending the goal posts and wishing to help out. But of course Sam the Gonoph and his guys cannot tell the Yales from the Harvards, and do not have time to ask which is which, so they are just letting everybody have it who comes along. And while all this is going on our little doll is sitting up on the cross-bar and yelling plenty of encouragement to Sam and his guys.

Now it turns out that these Harvards are by no means soft touches in a scrabble such as this, and as fast as they are flattened they get up and keep belting away, and while the old experience is running for Sam the Gonoph and Jew Louie and Nubbsy Taylor and Benny South Street and old Liverlips early in the fight, the Harvards have youth in their favor.

Pretty soon the Harvards are knocking down Sam the Gonoph then they start knocking down Nubbsy Taylor, and by and by they are knocking down Benny South Street and Jew Louie and Liverlips, and it is so much fun that the Harvards forget all about the goal posts. Of course as fast as Sam the Gonoph and his guys are knocked down they also get up, but, the Harvards are too many for them, and they are getting an

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

awful shellacking when the nine-foot guy who flattens me, and who is knocking down Sam the Gonoph so often he is becoming a great nuisance to Sam, sings out:

"Listen," he says, "these are game guys, even if they do go to Yale. Let us cease knocking them down," he says, "and give them a cheer."

So the Harvards knock down Sam the Gonoph and Nubbsy Taylor and Jew Louie and Benny South Street and old Liverlips just off more and then all the Harvards put their heads together and say rah-rah-rah, very loud, and go away, leaving the goal posts still standing, with our little doll still roosting on the cross-bar, although afterwards I hear some Harvards who are not in the fight get the posts at the other end of the field and sneak away with them. But I always claim these posts do not count.

Well, sitting there on the ground because he is too tired to get up from the last knockdown, and holding one hand to his right eye, which is closed tight, Sam the Gonoph is by no means a well guy, and all around and about him is much suffering among his crew. But our little doll is hopping up and down chattering like a jaybird and running between old Liverlips, who is stretched out against one goal post, and Nubbsy Taylor, who is leaning up against the other, and she is trying to mop the blood off their kissers with a handkerchief the size of a postage stamp.

Benny South Street is laying across Jew Louie and both are still snoring from the last knockdown, and the Bowl is now pretty much deserted except for the newspaper scribes away up in the press box, who do not seem to realize that the Battle of the Century just comes off in front of them. It is coming on dark, when all of a sudden a guy pops up out of the dusk wearing white spats and an overcoat with a fur collar, and he rushes up to our little doll.

"Clarice," he says, "I am looking for you high and low. My train is stalled for hours behind a wreck the other side of Bridgeport, and I get here just after the game is over. But," he says, "I

## HOLD 'EM, YALE

figure you will be waiting somewhere for me. Let us hurry on to Hartford, darling," he says.

Well, when he hears this voice, Sam the Gonoph opens his good eye wide and takes a peek at the guy. Then all of a sudden Sam jumps up and wobbles over to the guy and hits him a smack between the eyes. Sam is wobbling because his legs are not so good from the shellacking he takes off the Harvards, and furthermore he is away off in his punching as the guy only goes to his knees and comes right up standing again as our little doll lets out a screech and speaks as follows:

"Oo-oo!" she says. "Do not hit Elliot! He is not after our goal posts!"

"Elliot?" Sam the Gonoph says. "This is no Elliot. This is nobody but Gigolo Georgie. I can tell him by his white spats," Sam says, "and I am now going to get even for the pasting I take from the Harvards."

Then he nails the guy again and this time he seems to have a little more on his punch, for the guy goes down and Sam the Gonoph gives him the leather very good, although our little doll is still screeching, and begging Sam not to hurt Elliot. But of course the rest of us know it is not Elliot, no matter what he may tell her, but only Gigolo Georgie.

Well, the rest of us figure we may as well take a little something out of Georgie's hide, too, but as we start for him he gives a quick wiggle and hops to his feet and tears across the field, and the last we see of him is his white spats flying through one of the portals.

Now a couple of other guys come up out of the dusk, and one of them is a tall, fine-looking guy with a white mustache, and anybody can see that he is somebody, and what happens but our little doll runs right into his arms and kisses him on the white mustache and calls him daddy and starts to cry more than somewhat, so I can see we lose our little doll then and there. And now the guy with the white mustache walks up to Sam the Gonoph and sticks out his duke and says as follows:

"Sir," he says, "permit me the honor of shaking the hand

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

which does me the very signal service of chastising the scoundrel who just escapes from the field. And," he says, "permit me to introduce myself to you. I am J. Hildreth Van Cleve, president of the Van Cleve Trust. I am notified early to-day by Miss Peevy of my daughter's sudden departure from school, and we learn she purchases a ticket for New Haven. I at once suspect this fellow has something to do with it. Fortunately," he says, "I have these private detectives here keeping tab on him for some time, knowing my child's schoolgirl infatuation for him, so we easily trail him here. We are on the train with him, and arrive in time for your last little scene with him. Sir," he says, "again I thank you."

"I know who you are, Mr. Van Cleve," Sam the Gonoph says. "You are the Van Cleve who is down to his last forty million. But," he says, "do not thank me for putting the slug on Gigolo Georgie. He is a bum in spades, and I am only sorry he fools your nice little kid even for a minute, although," Sam says, "I figure she must be dumber than she looks to be fooled by such a guy as Gigolo Georgie."

"I hate him," the little doll says. "I hate him because he is a coward. He does not stand up and fight when he is hit like you and Liverlips and the others. I never wish to see him again."

"Do not worry," Sam the Gonoph says. "I will be too close to Gigolo Georgie as soon as I recover from my wounds for him to stay in this part of the country."

Well, I do not see Sam the Gonoph or Nubbsy Taylor or Benny South Street or Jew Louie or Liverlips for nearly a year after this, and then it comes on fall again and one day I get to thinking that here it is Friday and the next day the Harvards are playing the Yales a large football game in Boston.

I figure it is a great chance for me to join up with Sam the Gonoph again and hustle duckets for him for this game, and I know Sam will be leaving along about midnight with his crew. So I go over to the Grand Central station at such a time, and sure enough he comes along by and by, busting through the crowd in the station with Nubbsy Taylor and Benny South Street

## HOLD 'EM, YALE

and Jew Louie and old Liverlips at his heels, and they seem very much excited.

"Well, Sam," I say, as I hurry along with them, "here I am ready to hustle duckets for you again, and I hope and trust we do a nice business."

"Duckets!" Sam the Gonoph says. "We are not hustling duckets for this game, although you can go with us and welcome. We are going to Boston," he says, "to root for the Yales, to kick hell out of the Harvards and we are going as the personal guests of Miss Clarice Van Cleve and her old man."

"Hold 'em, Yale!" old Liverlips says, as he pushes me to one side, and the whole bunch goes trotting through the gate to catch their train, and I then notice they are all wearing blue feathers in their hats with a little white Y on these feathers such as college guys always wear at football games, and that moreover Sam the Gonoph is carrying a Yale pennant.

## Old Martin\*

A. E. COPPARD

*\* A. E. Coppard is a well-known English writer of distinctive stories. He was born and educated in England and commenced to publish in 1921. Since then he has been represented in numerous collections and has published novels, poems, and short stories. Old Martin is a ghost story of unusual character.*

THREE Barnover men died, and died badly too, within a month of each other; a succession of mortality so swift as to be almost terrifying. Barnover was proud of its folks' longevity; it was four or five years since any one had died there; but the alarm had its mitigations, for the three dead men were drunken, lecherous, swearing fellows.

Barnover was hidden in an oval pan-like hollow surrounded by turfy hills, a very quiet, stolid place. The railway was four miles distant and the main road as far off in another direction. A kennel of hounds was kept there, and a mill for the weaving of thick cloth. There was also a brown, dumpy church, the tiniest of graveyards chock-full of headstones, and a large, portly vicarage with suitable vicar. Of the two inns, the *Fox* was favoured by the Oddfellows, while none but Foresters foregathered at the *Angel*. In summer there was cricket on the green, in winter there was nothing; but the people were prosperous enough to be contented; their natures were simple to the point of superstition; they were happy even though not very wise. If Barnover men had a vice at all it was toying; the Oddfellows and Foresters were strong, thirsty men—something in the

\*From *Fishmonger's Fiddle*, by A. E. Coppard. Alfred A. Knopf, 1934. Reprinted by permission of A. E. Coppard.



## OLD MARTIN

air, perhaps—but things were easier now the three drunken rips were dead and buried. Ephraim Stinch, the last of them, had been the worst of all.

"Those three scandalous drunkards are at rest now, and the place is all the better for it," people said, and George Bartlett, the huntsman, said it when he came to supper with Old Martin and Monica about that time.

But *were* they at rest? Old Martin had his doubts. He was a retired seafaring man living with his orphan niece, the school-mistress of Barnover.

"Your grandmother in Galway," he began to his niece, Monica Doyle, "your grandmother, Eva Martin—she was second-sighted—often told me the dead have no rest; they do not rest, they do not rest at all. And what's more, Bartlett, the last-come to the cemetery, the last one to be buried, that one, she said, has to slave and to serve all the other lost souls that lie in the same consecrated patch waiting for their judgment; the last one," he repeated, "always."

The tall girl stared at her Uncle Martin. The huntsman, a plump, twinkling person with crooked legs, said:

"So I have heard, too; ah, and Ephraim Stinch will have his hands full of it rushing to Limbo or Tophet or wherever he is ordered to go."

"Go he must," Old Martin asserted. "Until the next poor soul dies and gets buried there, he'll fetch and carry, carry and fetch. But at last his own turn is bound to come."

"Yes, I can believe that; ha, ha!" cried old George. "Ho, ho, yes, that I can."

But Monica shuddered; she did not like to hear of this. She had feared the living Ephraim Stinch, a powerful, ruddy, unruly farmer, of forty or thereabouts, with a large horn-like nose and an ox-like moustache—he resembled a Swiss; now he was dead she wanted to think of him as done with. His house had been dim and dirty, his farm harsh and hungry, with stealthy cats, lean dogs, and famished hens. He had ogled Monica, very often he had ogled and affronted her when he was drunk, some-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

times even when he was sober. Oh, he had been fond of her according to his lights, and indeed in spite of the drink he had money in the bank, but Monica could not think of him or look at him without repulsion. He had drunkenly sworn to get even with her.

"In fact," continued the huntsman, "I *know* such things be true, for I'd the proof of it, the very warrant of it; three nights ago—or four if this be Thursday."

A rotund little squirrel of a man, still dapper in mind and body, was this huntsman, whose healthy shaven face looked as if he washed in tomato soup. Without a vein of contrariety in his frame, or a useful conception in his mind about anything but the hunting of a fox, he was just a genial person who delighted to agree with everybody. A teller of tales and a retailer of news that he trilled off his jolly mind and forgot. All information was grist to him, he affected to believe everything he was told, and he hoped for similar faith in his own hearers. His mishandling of the truth amounted to genius, but there was no harm in him at all.

"I tell you I know," he asservated to Martin, "because I have seen that man since he died."

Old Martin glanced at Monica and at George in turn. Certainly the principal emotion expressed in his glances was scepticism, but he only said: "God bless us!"

"I have seen the man," repeated the huntsman.

"I knew it!" declared Old Martin. Monica begged to be told about it.

"He walks," the huntsman said, his gaze dropping to the table. "As I'm a living man I saw his ghost four nights ago if this be Thursday." He was groping thoughtfully with his left hand for a morsel of bread.

"'Twas past eleven o'clock, and I'd just popped out in my shirt-sleeves for a smoke, not thinking it would be so dark. Dark! I could scarcely find my way out of my own garden gate. I be got into the road when I see something." George here swallowed the last pickled walnut and took a deliberate swig at his glass

## OLD MARTIN

of beer. "For all the darkness I *saw* something and I said to myself, 'That's a good visible man, for this dark night seems to choke my very eyesight. I wonder who he may be.' And before I knew it the words popped into my head and out of my mouth: 'Is that you, Ephraim Stinch?' It didn't make no reply, no reply at all, but 'twas Ephraim Stinch as large as life. 'God help me,' I said, and I wanted to run, but I couldn't, so I gave a few damns to myself and stood till the thing was by me, and I knew that but for the dark I could ha' seen right through him to his spinal column. He did not look like e'er a ghost I ever heard tell of; no skeleton, nor no white sheet, nor no brimstone fire; was just the man himself, same's we all knew him, though if it hadn't been dark I'd a seen right through him, like that glass."

Monica silently filled it.

"It took no notice of me, but—this is the awful story—that ghost was roaring drunk (thank you, Miss Monica), as I'm a living man, full to the gob, but no sound coming from it. Cussing and damning, ramping and roaring—you could see—staggering from here to yon, you could see but you could hear nothing, not a word, not a footfall, and that's how it passed behind me, close as the back of my chair. A very strong murderous man, sir. When it was gone by I pulled myself together. A man has got to be a man, whether or no, but believe you me, my flesh wherever I touched myself felt like that blancmange. I didn't know rightly whether I burned or froze. My hair was just grass and my elbows were stiff and chill as the handle of a jug. What I want to know is where he got it."

"Got what?" they both interrogated him.

"The strong drink—and how could he carry it. Whatever it was it should by rights have dropped clean through him—begging your pardon, Miss Monica."

"It was devil's drink," murmured Old Martin.

"Yes, I suppose," agreed the huntsman, "the devil's own drink. But where he got it! Eh! Ah, well, some will perish their mortal souls for anything—for anything. But not me, would you?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"He is working out his fate, Bartlett, you may depend."

"Sir," said the other solemnly, laying his right palm confidently upon the tablecloth and inclining his head towards the Captain, but at the same time slewing a glance towards Monica, "I don't envy the poor lost souls he's among; the devil himself would be a greater comfort to 'em in their strange situation. Young lady, ghosts are terrible things, terrible!"

Old Martin was much impressed by this sound confirmation of his ghostly theme. A good man's simple credulity was his: "You are sure it was Ephraim?"

"Why, bless you," protested the huntsman, "I knew him as a boy. A hard man, sir, his own mother died in bearing him, and he was a sickly child until his father, who was a butcher, fed him on spoonfuls of raw ox-blood. Then he thrived, I do assure you; ha, ha!"

"O, but that is horrible!" Monica put her fingers into her ears. George was dismayed and hastened to change the subject.

"Talking of tippie, d'ye know, James, it is not a great many years ago when our parson himself was fond of a cup of strong drink. Ah, many a firkin of good stingo have gone down his gullet and laid to rest. Mind you,"—he lowered his voice—"that is between ourselves; but truth's true, and let it be known."

Old James Martin had followed the sea for nigh upon forty years; then had he suddenly cried, "Done!" and severed himself from it, retaining not a single maritime reminder, not a flag, telescope, barometer, whistle, uniform, or cutlass. Clad in a grey tweed suit and a white panama hat he came to live with his widowed sister in Barnover, carrying only a mirror given him by a strange woman in Java. It was a foot square, bound in copper, and he hung it up on the wall of his bedroom.

When Monica was fourteen, eight years ago, Mrs. Doyle died. Martin had installed a maidservant in the little house, enabling his bonny niece to qualify as a teacher by the time she had grown into a handsome woman. Then indeed the pleasures of life and home were deepened and enlarged. What a pleasant little house it was, thatched and bright straw and coloured with

## OLD MARTIN

saffron wash; the fruit trees, much cherished by the old sailor, almost hid it. But most of the homes in Barnover were like that, and a fantastic stranger once looking down from the encircling hills when fruit bloom was flaunting in every garden had declared that Barnover village resembled an omelette lying in a green dish.

Old Martin lived on there, loving his niece and his garden, but nothing else, maintaining a simple but not uncharitable reserve to all but George Bartlett, the huntsman, and disliking nobody, except, perhaps, the Reverend Coberly Nashe. The parson had a fat, expensive-looking stomach, lean legs, and, as far as could be discovered, a lean mind that did not cost him a penny. But Martin was a regular attendant at his church and a subscriber to his funds.

The sturdy old mariner, with his clipped grey beard, suit of tweed, hat of straw, always carried a malacca cane trimmed with a silver knob when he walked in Barnover. If occasionally he spoke to casual acquaintances such as the policeman and the postman, he would genially address them as: "Well, my son, how is it with you to-day?" If it were a child he recognized he would always stop and, fumbling in his pockets, inquire, "Well, old man!" or "Well, old lady!"

When Monica died Old Martin began to hate the parson and ceased to attend his church. Monica died soon, and suddenly, almost mysteriously. The tragedy crushed the old man's mind, and it physically weakened him. She was buried in the churchyard, a new white stone was set at the head of the mound; a new mistress taught in the school, and no one seemed a penny the worse or a penny the wiser.

But Old Martin was in anguish, not so much for his personal loss as for Monica's own fearful fate. For it was in vain he tried to repudiate that wild notion of her grandmother: *The dead do not rest. The last-comer serves the lost souls.* Deep down it was an instinctive belief; grafted upon his childhood it clung to him. Dreams of the dead girl flocked into his sleep, terrible dreams that drove sleep from him and brought agony and mad-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

ness. These were dreams not alone of Monica, for he saw, or his distracted mind thought it saw, the dreadful sodden form of Stinch dogging, enslaving and destroying his beautiful girl. He visibly aged, he recognized no one in the streets and was greeted by none—even the children stood unnoted at his side. All refrained from touching the deep wound of his sorrow; they could do no other, he was so changed. He walked in loneliness on the hills above the village, and the countrymen, seeing his ambling figure there, would mutter: "Old Martin again. He takes it badly; the poor man." Daylight gave him no relief, for he sought no relief for himself; all his malady was a vast anxiety for Monica whose doom floated ever about him, touching and maddening him until his wits went wandering. Casting his thoughts around upon his neighbours, he wondered: "Who then will die soon? On what poor unfortunate will it fall to take this load of evil from Monica, and she be free and sleeping?" He ran over in his mind all the old people of the place, but none was sick or sorry, all were hearty, the least of them might last another ten years. Then, all at once, a great light broke upon him. Why, he could kill himself! Of course he could! That would trim Ephraim Stinch's ghost, leave *him* alone for that! But he would have to disguise his intention, for they would not bury a suicide in that same consecrated ground. Not all the dead bodies in the world could help Monica unless they were buried there. They must not bury him at a cross road.

That night the old man lay sleepless in his bed, but with a mind more tranquil now he had seen a way of hope, when his gaze was caught by the faint gleam on the wall of the square mirror from Java. Suddenly from the floor beneath it something puffed like a spirt of thick white smoke. It rolled and lolled right up to the ceiling, and then resolved slowly into a round mass like a balloon. At last that began to droop and flag and fold itself into the shape of Monica, tall and frail, wearing a blue robe with gold beads and bands, the blue of succory. She had a face of marble whiteness and pale gold hair.

He knew it was she though the darkness was complete. Had

## OLD MARTIN

it not been so dark he would have seen right through her body, he felt sure. It was she, though he had never seen her in a robe of that kind. In the morning he felt that he had had a beautiful dream, but he could not remember it.

His friend George came to see him, but could make nothing of him. The old man was gone wavering in his mind, he was dull, until George said, "Come, my old friend, you must get yourself out of this humour. Sorrow don't last for ever."

"Does it not?"

"It will bring nothing back to ye. Sorrow don't give, it only takes away. You must come out of your shell and ockipy your mind with things."

"I see too many things, Bartlett."

"What things?"

"Not of this world. Stinch and my Monica!" The old man broke into tears.

"Au but . . . but . . ." spluttered the huntsman, "that can't be true, my old friend, they're . . . they've passed away!"

"I know, I know, but I see her. And you have seen him."

"Me!" cried the dapper one. "Never in this world, never in this life! Mind you, I don't say as spirits are not to be seen, but they never come my way, never on your life, James."

The old man gazed at him in dismay. "But you yourself saw Ephraim Stinch, you told us, you told us, you told Monica."

"Pshaw!" The huntsman stood up, fiddling with his hat. "You been adreaming, James. I ain't seen Ephraim Stinch, I ain't seen him"—he reflectively cocked his eye—"no, not since a week afore he died. Come you along now. This kind of thought is no good to you, it's too depressing. You want a cheerfuller outlook, all the gossip of the town that goes on round about ye. Did ye hear now of old Harry Chalgrove? Died last night—in a fit!"

"Dead! O heavens," quavered the old, "is that true? Good news, George, it is good news indeed! What a load that takes from my mind; it's gladness. When will he be buried, George?"

The huntsman was so amazed at this outburst that he could not speak. Noting the concern in his friend's eyes, Old Martin

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

continued: "Don't you see? My girl's spirit has been roaming and restless—Monica—fetching and carrying—in mortal danger from that Stinch. Horrible? You remember, don't you—the last soul buried slaves for all?"

"Well, to be sure, I can't tell whether or no. But Harry Chalgrove will not be buried in the churchyard. 'Tis full up! They will put him aground in the new lot!"

It was true. Barnover churchyard was now as full as it could be; it was recently completely and finally filled. Monica's corpse was the last; not another body would it hold. The Council had already procured another half-acre in a different part of the parish. It had been trimmed and consecrated, and now awaited the inevitable procession of luckless mortality. Harry Chalgrove was to head it.

This was a circumstance of dreadful, shocking import to Old Martin, to whose diseased comprehension it was plain that nothing now could ever release the soul of Monica from its horrible task. That stricken soul was doomed to drift in ceaseless agony till the Day of Judgment.

The huntsman comforted his friend. "Go see Parson Nashe about it. Something may be done yet."

Martin went to bed determining to ask Nashe's assistance in the morning. In the middle of the night the ghost came in a cloud again, and this time it appeared to fade away into the Javanese mirror as if that were a portal to the Unknown. Old Martin did not sleep, and at an early hour, trembling, he sought the help of the parson.

The Rev. Coberly Nashe received him in his study, a comfortable, heartless, linoleumed room with a great looking-glass and a carafe of water on the black mantelpiece. Columns of dusty books were piled in the corners or against the knee-hole desk of pale wood lined with dark green leather. The window was closed, though the morning was warm, and the room smelled of upholstery that seemed to be decomposing. There was little else in the room but some chairs and the Rev. Coberly Nashe, who had a stomach that could be delicately described as buxom



## OLD MARTIN

and a countenance that might have seemed all mouth and teeth but for the spectacled eyes that glistened and gloomed at the visitor.

Old Martin's request to him was that Chalgrove's body might be buried in the old churchyard instead of the new cemetery lot; the dead man had no relatives or friends; he was old, he had been forgotten.

"I fear it is an impossibility, Mr. Martin. I fear so. But why do you ask for this? It is kind and considerate, but it is . . . singular."

The visitor sat silent. Nashe got up and filled a glass with water from the carafe. Sipping it occasionally, he straddled before Old Martin.

"Extraordinary difficulty, you know," he went on, between his sips. "Act of Parliament—that sort of thing—absurd, of course—but there you are."

Nashe very carefully replaced the glass and leaned with an elbow upon the mantelpiece, twirling his watchguard with the disengaged hand. It was of black cord hung with a medallion of copper, a cross of gold, and a seal of silver.

"I would do anything to oblige you, Mr. Martin, anything, but this is not a case for obligation; it is a thing beyond my power to do. Anything, I assure you, to oblige . . ."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Nashe?"

The vicar was silent. Old Martin raised his musing head:

"From the day of death the soul may be in grief or pain to the Day of Judgment, and if we neglect it, it haunts its friends and its home, seeking relief. Such things are seen and known, for sure, sir!"

"Oh, come, Mr. Martin, different men, different vision. I like to keep an open mind. These things are hidden from our mortal eyes, we can but conjecture. But the human eye, the human eye, mind, can only see human objects . . ."

"Then maybe you'd not see what I do see and have seen. In three latitudes of the world's waters, very far apart, I assure you, I saw the Flying Dutchman! And that's a fabulous ship,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

the ghost of a strong vessel, full of the moving souls of dead men."

"That is very wonderful, my dear sir," said the vicar.

"And I saw," quavered the old man, "the ghost of a person lately dead in this parish. For the peace of that soul I want to see Chalgrove buried in the old yard."

"But why? But why?"

Old Martin did not care to give his fantastic reason to this sceptic. He only said:

"He should be buried with the friends of his bygone days."

The vicar was all at sixes and sevens. Queer man, Old Martin! He observed the alteration in him (poor old chap!), and he was very sympathetic, but there was nothing he could do; there was not a foot of space left. What could he do? Nothing!

The old man went away despondently, but in half an hour he was back again in the vicar's room. He felt he had not been frank enough with the parson. Now he told Nashe how the spirit of his niece visited him in a ball of smoke, how she was being ceaselessly harried by the dire menace of Stinch. And so he wanted the body of Monica, already three months in its grave, transferred from the churchyard to the new cemetery lot. Let Chalgrove have her place.

Of course it was an impossible request. Sacrilegious! Preposterous! Nashe bluntly told him that his mind was perhaps a little unhinged by grief. He was unwell, ill, must look after himself carefully, consult a doctor, and so on. Mr. Nashe was intensely sympathetic, but just then he was also very busy.

"My dear sir, it cannot be done without a faculty, and a faculty could not be procured for love or money in such a case. Only by an order of the higher authorities for an extraordinary occasion. My dear sir, my sympathy is with you, needless to say, entirely with you. But it would be impossible, ludicrous even, for me to approach them on such an errand. You see it's impossible, don't you? Why, my good man Martin, you know in your heart of hearts it is absurd. That you should see the spirit of your niece is, I am of firm belief, due to hallucination,

## OLD MARTIN

pure hallucination; and to see the soul of Stinch in a state of insobriety is undoubtedly an hallucination of the Evil One himself. Fix your thoughts upon the Almighty and this madness will leave you. Oh, and see a doctor." Alternately looking at his watch and burbling in this fashion, the vicar bumbled Old Martin out of the vicarage door and through the vicarage garden into the road, where, patting him on the shoulder and howling "Hallucination!" at him twice, as if it were the name of a sovran remedy, he left him.

The ghost of Monica allowed her uncle no peace. Her own restlessness, her trouble, was to be shared with him. In the middle of the night she came again. The cloud of smoke puffed from the floor below the mirror from Java. It spun into a lolling globe that sank and declined like drapery round a whirling dancer, and there was she. The man felt no terror, only an anguish of human helplessness. The girl did not look at him; no sound, no sign, pale and unbeseeking, a figure whose pitiful appearance clawed at his heart, she stood peering into the mirror.

"Monica!" he gasped. At the word she faded and died; it seemed that she passed, a little whorl of smoke, into the mirror itself. After a few moments he rose from his bed and looked squarely into the strange glass from Java that hung upon a wall. At that momentary glimpse a shriek of horror burst from him; he sank trembling upon his bed. Credence no longer wavered; all his mind's foreboding flamed into terrible confirmation. He lay almost senseless until the cocks began to crow and day came once more, but not to lull his fears.

George Bartlett called again the next evening and they sat in the garden under a walnut tree. He was startled at Old Martin's terrible appearance.

"There, there," he soothed the trembling man when he heard of his experience. "By God, what is it, James? I tell you what, my old friend; say but the word and we'll dig her up together and plant her elsewhere, some dark night, but not to-night, for

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

I've an early job to-morrow. But when you like, James, whenever you choose, I'll stand to you."

"Tis no good, Bartlett, no good. You can't play tricks with an evil that comes from hell itself. There is nothing mortal can deceive it. Its course must run for ever and ever and ever."

In the dim air of that thick and moveless evening the bell in the church tower deeply hummed its nine o'clock. A distant flock of sheep baaed in a preposterous bass. A young owl kept up a shrill snarl, a mixture of bird whistle and the bark of a puppy. Martin looked up into the tree:

"O trees, trees, you should have some springy elastic growth so that if you pulled down a branch, Monica, you could shoot yourself into the skies, like a catapult!" He recovered himself and looked at his friend.

"Except, of course, for gravity, Bartlett. She couldn't conquer gravity, nobody ever has. Gravity, graveyard, graves—oh, when shall I go—what shall I do—where shall I be buried!"

The old man's tears were shocking to the jolly huntsman. He tried to rally his friend, and to persuade him to that body-snatching effort.

"James, it can be done, it has been done. I know the man as done it, too, and all. He worked for a gentleman in Scotland, in some castle it was, where the king of Scotland used to live when the wars were on. The queen's chair is in it now. Bless you, yes."

But Martin declined the impious offer. The huntsman went home and declared to his wife: "Old Martin is mad. There is not a doubt upon it. I do believe he is mad."

Then, although it was so late, Old Martin took his stick and called upon the vicar. He was in his study, sitting between two candles with a book in his hands. He listened to the man's fresh evidence, and then said with a snort of irritation: "There is nothing in the whole world I can do for you. I have told you how impossible it all is, but you have given your mind to it, I suppose. Now you see the result. You can believe anything if you let your mind dwell upon it, anything, James Martin," he

## OLD MARTIN

said sternly. "The mind is an obstinate thing, it goes its own way. I am reading this book now, you see, a book of divinity, to help me in my sermons. But I cannot attend to it well, for I keep thinking of a piece of business I have in hand and intend to do. I go on reading my book, but I cannot understand it, not one single word, for all that business I intend to do keeps pressing itself forward like a child that is bothering me and will have my attention. At last I put down my book, lean back in my chair, and let my mind dwell upon that piece of business I have to do. And then, what do you think? My mind dismisses that business, it refuses to contemplate anything but the book I have been reading, although I have not absorbed its contents. How is this now, tell me?"

But Old Martin could not tell him, he could not understand him, he could only realize that the soul of Monica was harshly suffering. Nashe declined in his chair, linked his fingers across his stomach, and gazed at his visitor with a smile that endeavoured to be benignant, but uncommonly resembled a grimace. He sat up and said: "So you see! you see! Concentration! You must concentrate your mind." He accompanied the old man to the vicarage gate, loudly exhorting him not to let his mind dwell upon goblins and cantrips, they were a kind of intemperance, an intoxication, they would pass. And when the vicar saw the old man disappear in the darkness, he too murmured: "Poor old chap, all the tiles loose, quite gone. It's excess of grief, he is mad. I must speak to the doctor about him; it makes me uneasy." He walked up to a glow-worm in his garden path, and taking it to be a spent match carefully put his foot upon it. And when he got back into his study his mind leaped to his own absorbing business. For he was a widower, contemplating a new marriage to a spinster who had five thousand pounds and a moustache.

Martin carried his grief locked in his own breast for days; he scarcely stirred from his home; if he did, the people eyed him furtively, children avoided him. Once more the huntsman called.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Do you know what I've done, James?" he began impressively. "I killed our best hound, Glossary, prince of the pack—and last night, listen James, Mr. Martin, I buried him myself in the churchyard. He's in the corner there behind the monkey tree. That's cooked the business. Don't tell me! If that soul of a dog can't settle all his business I'm a salamander. James, that dog-hound Glossary beats cock-fighting. He could nose out an earwig and he could kill a bison beast, Glossary could. You go to your rest, James."

And James went, but not to rest—never again under heaven. The huntsman's plan must have failed, for horrors thickened upon him; the image of his niece, vision, hallucination, or mirage, was fraught with unending torture.

The vicar spoke to the doctor, the doctor told the squire, the squire revealed that Old Martin's retirement from sea had been adroitly hastened by the shipowners on account of certain delusions held by the captain; quite simple, harmless delusions, but seamen were superstitious, uneasy men, and the owners could not afford to take any risks. Besides, their old trusted servant had done exceedingly well; he had amassed a modest little fortune which they supplemented with a pension. And so on.

Barnover began to watch him, but no one came near him any more; even the faithful huntsman deserted him. His obsession, however, did not desert him; it ravaged his life and left him peaked and pined.

One day in October, when the last apples were being gathered, a cadaverous Old Martin called once more at the vicarage. The vicar could not see him, he was unwell. A few days later, Martin called again; the vicar was ill. In short, the Rev. Coberly Nashe was unable to fulfil his engagement to marry the spinster, for he died.

Behold, he was buried under the pavement of his own church, in the same tomb with his long-departed wife, and not more than twenty feet from the coffin of Ephraim Stinch.

An excellent change was soon observable in the conduct and appearance of Old Martin. It could not be exactly dated, but im-

## OLD MARTIN

perceptibly that haunted look slipped from his visage, the quiet smile came back. Good health overtook him, his ribs began to fatten, his back to unbend, his beard to be clipped again. He became once more the sprightly veteran, not less immersed in his own quiet thoughts, but at least happy in them. Other elderly men chatted to him, complimenting him upon his recovery, and when they did so, "Ho, my son!" he would say, and exchange amiable views with them about the affability of the weather, the price of crops, or the shortening days, as is the custom of amiable, affable persons in Barnover—and possibly elsewhere. Little Pollys, Janes, Arabellas, and Rachels, who had lived as many months as he had years, again became his "Old Girls," receiving also a largesse which led to such an increase of trade at the lollypop shop that its ancient dame, Miss Phipps, threw up her hands and recklessly ordered a whole seven pounds of butterscotch where she had previously contracted for four.

When the hounds met at the end of Barnover High Lane just before Christmas, Old Martin, too, walked along to the assembly of hounds and hunters. Every one was jolly, and George sat on a big sandy-coloured gelding in the midst of the hounds, a grand figure in his scarlet coat. A good sixpennyworth of cochineal had been exhausted in cleaning that coat from stain; the pipeclay on his breeches, the gloss upon his hunting cap, the lustre of his boots, the sparkle of his spurs! Wonderful! George kept cracking his whip and roaring at the dogs. "You . . . Waterford! Nora, girl! Come back, Glossary!" Glossary, indeed, was particularly tiresome. People from miles around, important people, too, who had come in to the meet, walked up to George and shook hands with him, while he cracked a joke or cracked his whip or swore lustily at a slinking hound. "You, Glossary!"

"Why, James!" he cried, when he saw Old Martin. Martin stepped among the hounds to his friend and shook hands heartily with him. George retained the old sailor's hand in his clasp and, bending down, whispered confidentially, "Old friend, how

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

is it with you?" and Martin replied that he was never so well in his life before. George released his hand after another earnest pressure and sat upright in the saddle. "Good 'ealth," said the huntsman with a sigh—though why that figure of prime and radiant existence should exude a sigh when joy was surely chippering in his birdlike breast is a matter beyond explanation—"Good 'ealth's a wonderful thing!"

Then he leaned down once more, while for a space the hounds roamed unreprieved. "How is that sad business? Do you see anything o' nights now?"

Old Martin smiled sweetly: "My poor girl is at rest at last."

"Good!" murmured the huntsman fervently. "What did I tell you! That dog I killed—that . . . that Bolingbroke—he was the masterpiece of this earth! A masterpiece!" He repeated it again and again, much louder. "A masterpiece!"

"Three weeks since, though," Old Martin said, "I saw a thing that would have interested you." He smiled up at George. "I saw, on my soul, I saw Ephraim Stinch!"

The huntsman sat up and surveyed his friend with stern, puckered eyes. Martin beckoned with his finger and the huntsman bent down to him again. "There were two of them, though. I saw those two ghosts as clear as I see you, Bartlett. He was arm-in-arm with Parson Nashe. I never saw a living man so drunk as that dead parson was."

George perked himself upright with a shout of laughter. "Don't tell me! God above, would you believe it, James! Good for you, James," he roared. "Damned if ever I heard tell of a boozy ghost afore! Never on my life, ho, ho! ha, ha!"

At that moment, Barnover clock struck eleven. The master called out, "Hounds, please, gentlemen!" and they all moved off to the top of the hills.



## Sunstroke \*

IVAN BUNIN

*Ivan Bunin, well known in Russia but because of his aristocratic family connections now an émigré living in Paris and on the Riviera, sprang into international prominence in 1933 when he received the Nobel Award for distinction in literature. Most short story readers are familiar with his The Gentleman from San Francisco. Sunstroke, reproduced here, is equally good. It has also appeared in Story.*

THEY had had their dinner, and they left the brilliantly lighted dining-room and went on deck where they paused by the rail. She closed her eyes and, palm turned outward, pressing her hand to her cheek, laughed with unaffected charm. Everything was charming about this little woman. She said:

"I'm quite intoxicated. . . . Or I've gone wholly out of my mind. Where did you drop down from? But three hours ago I scarcely suspected your existence. I don't even know where you came on board. Was it in Samara? Well, it doesn't matter, my dear. Really, my head's in a whirl, or is it the boat turning?"

Before them was darkness—and lights. Out of the darkness a strong soft breeze<sup>b</sup>blew in their faces, while the lights glided past them: with Volga friskiness the steamer cut a sharp curve, as it approached the small pier.

The lieutenant took her hand, lifting it to his lips. The strong small hand smelt of sunburn. Bliss and anguish caused his heart to grow tremulous at the thought that underneath this light<sup>c</sup> linen dress she was doubtless all strong and tanned after a whole

\* From *Grammar of Love*, by Ivan Bunin. Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1934. Reprinted by permission of Ivan Bunin, and his agent, W. A. Bradley, of Paris.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

month's lying under the southern sun upon the hot sea sands (she had said she was coming from Anapu). The lieutenant murmured: "Let's get off here. . . ."

"Where?" she asked in astonishment.

"Here, on this pier."

"Why?"

He was silent. Again she laid the back of her hand upon her hot cheek.

"You're mad. . . ."

"Let's get off," he repeated dully. "I implore you . . ."

"*Akh*, do as you like," she said, turning away.

The moving steamer crashed with a dull thud against the dimly lighted pier, and the pair almost fell upon each other. The end of a cable came flying above their heads, then the ship receded and the water clamorously seethed, the gang-plank rattled. . . . The lieutenant ran for the luggage.

Presently they passed through the tiny drowsy pier shed and, once out of doors, found themselves ankle-deep in sand; in silence they seated themselves in the dust-covered hackney cab. The ascent of the steep road, soft with dust, punctuated with infrequent lamp-posts standing awry, seemed endless. At last they emerged on top, the carriage rattled along a paved street; here was a square, some administrative buildings, a belfry, the warmth and the smells of a summer night in a provincial town. . . . The cabby stopped before a lighted entrance; through the open doors could be seen the steep wooden stairway. An old unshaven servant in a pink shirt and frock-coat reluctantly took their bags and went forward on his tired feet. They entered a large but terribly stuffy room still hot from the day's sun, its windows hung with white curtains, its mirror-topped mantelpiece decorated with two unused candles—and no sooner had they entered and the servant closed the door upon them than the lieutenant impetuously flung himself upon her and they both lost themselves in a kiss of such agonizing rapture that the moment was long to be remembered by them: nothing like it had ever been experienced by either one or the other.

## SUNSTROKE

At ten o'clock the next morning, a morning hot and sunny and gay with the ringing of church bells, with the humming in the market-place facing the hotel, with the smell of hay and tar and all those complex odors with which every provincial Russian town reeks, she, this nameless little woman, for she refused to reveal her name, jestingly calling herself the lovely stranger, left him, resuming her journey. They had slept little, but when she emerged from behind the screen near the bed, within five minutes all washed and dressed, she looked as fresh as a seventeen-year-old girl. Was she embarrassed? Very little. As before, she was simple, gay and—quite rational.

"No, no, my dear," she said in response to his suggestion that they pursue the journey together. "No, you must remain here until the next boat. If we go on together, everything will be spoiled. I wouldn't like that. Please believe me, I'm not at all the sort of woman I may have led you to think. All that happened here never happened before and never will again. It's as if I suffered an eclipse. . . . Or, to be more precise, it's as if we both experienced something in the nature of a sunstroke. . . ."

The lieutenant rather lightly agreed with her. In gay happy spirits he escorted her in a carriage to the pier, which they reached just as the rose-tinted steamer was on the point of departure, and, on deck, in the presence of other passengers, he kissed her, and barely managed to jump on to the already receding gang-plank.

With the same lightness of spirit he returned to the hotel. Yet something had changed. Their room without her seemed quite different. It was still full of her—and empty. That was strange! It still smelt of her excellent English eau-de-cologne, her unfinished cup was still on the tray, but she was no longer there. . . . And the lieutenant's heart suddenly felt such tremors of tenderness that he made haste to smoke and, slapping his boot-leg with a crop, he paced up and down the room.

"A strange occurrence!" he said aloud, laughing, yet conscious of tears in his eyes. "Please believe me, I'm not at all the sort

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

of woman I may have led you to think. . . .’ And now she’s gone . . . An absurd woman!”

The screen was pushed to one side, the bed had not yet been made. And he felt that now he simply hadn’t the courage to look upon his bed. He arranged the screen around it, closed the window that he might avoid hearing the market hum and the creaking of cart wheels, lowered the blown-out white curtains, and sat down on the divan. . . . Well, so that was the end to the “chance encounter”! She was gone—and was now far away, doubtless sitting in the glassed-in white salon or on deck, gazing at the immense sun-glinting river, at the passing barges, the yellow sand-banks, the distant radiance of water and sky, at the whole immeasurable expanse of the Volga. . . . And farewell, for ever, for eternity. . . . For how could they ever meet again? “I can’t, after all,” he mused, “for one reason or another, visit the town where her husband is, and her three-year-old daughter, and the rest of her family, the place where she leads her everyday life!”—And that town suddenly appeared to him as a most exceptional, a forbidden town, and the thought that she would go on living in it her lonely life, perhaps frequently remembering him, remembering their chance transient encounter, while he would never see her again, this thought stunned and unmanned him. No, this could not be! It was wholly absurd, unnatural, incredible! And he felt such anguish, such futility of existence in the years to come, that he was seized with terror, with despair.

“What the devil!” he thought, rising, and, again pacing up and down the room, he tried to avoid the sight of the bed behind the screen. “What’s the matter with me? Who’d have thought it possible that the first time—and there. . . . What is there about her, and what exactly has happened? Really, it is as if it were some sort of sunstroke! But the main thing is, how am I to spend the whole day without her in this God-forsaken place?”

He vividly remembered her as she was, with all her most intimate traits; he remembered the smell of her sunburn and of her linen dress, of her strong body, the live, simple, gay sound of her voice. . . . The mood of but lately experienced delights

## SUNSTROKE

of her feminine loveliness, was still singularly strong upon him; nevertheless, the main thing was another altogether new mood—that strange, incomprehensible mood, non-existent while they were still together, a mood which he could not have even imagined yesterday, when he first made this new, merely diverting, as he had thought, acquaintance, and concerning which he could no longer speak to anyone, no, not to anyone! “Yes, the main thing,” he went on thinking, “is that you’ll never be able to talk about it! And what is one to do, how is one to pass this endless day, with these memories, with this intolerable anguish, in this God-forsaken little town by that same radiant Volga, upon whose waters this rose-tinted steamer has borne her away!”

It was necessary to save himself, to occupy himself with something, to find amusement, to go somewhere. He resolutely put his cap on; strode vigorously, clinking his spurs, down the empty corridors; ran down the steep stairway toward the entrance. . . . Well, where should he go? At the entrance was a young cabby in a smart peasant’s coat, calmly smoking a tiny cigar, apparently waiting for someone. The lieutenant glanced at him in distraught wonder: how was it possible for anyone to sit so calmly on a coach-box, and smoke, and seem so unconcerned, so indifferent? “Evidently, in this whole town I alone am so terribly unhappy,” he thought, turning in the direction of the market-place.

The market was dispersing. Unwittingly he trod upon the fresh manure among the wagons, among the cart-loads of cucumbers, among the new pots and pans, and the women, who sat on the ground, vied with one another in trying to call his attention to their pots, which they took in their hands and made ring with their fingers, demonstrating their quality, while the peasants dinned in his ears: “Here are first-class cucumbers, Your Honor!” All this was stupid, absurd, and he ran from the place. He entered the church, where chanting was going on; it was loud and cheerful and determined, as if the chanters were conscious of the fulfilment of a duty; then he strode on through the streets, and in the heat of the sun wandered along the paths of a tiny neglected garden on the slope of a hill, overlooking the broad

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

river with its splendor as of glinting steel. The shoulder-straps and buttons of his white summer uniform grew so hot that it was impossible to touch them. The inner band of his cap was wet with perspiration, his face flamed. . . .

On returning to the hotel he found delicious relief in the shelter of the large, empty, cool dining-room; he removed his cap, sat down at a little table before an open window, through which the heat blew—a breeze for all that—and ordered an iced soup of pot-herbs. Everything was good, in everything there was immeasurable happiness, intense joy, even in this sultriness and in these market smells; in the whole unfamiliar little town and in this old provincial hotel it was present, this happiness, and, with it all, his heart was simply being rent into shreds. He drank several small glasses of vodka, and made a snack of pickled cucumbers, and he felt that without the least faltering he would choose to die tomorrow, if only by some miracle he could return to her and spend but this one day with her—if only to have a chance to tell her and somehow prove to her, persuade her of his harrowing and marvelous love. . . . But why prove it to her? Why persuade her? He could not tell why, yet it seemed more necessary than life itself.

"My nerves are playing me pranks!" he thought, as he poured himself a fifth glass of vodka.

He consumed an entire small decanter, hoping in intoxication to forget, to bring to an end his agonized exultation. But no, it only grew more intense.

He pushed away the cold herb soup, asked for black coffee, and began to smoke and resolutely to deliberate upon ways and means of freeing himself from this unexpected, sudden love. But to free himself—he felt this acutely—was impossible. And, suddenly, with a rapid movement, he rose, picked up his cap and crop, and, asking where the post-office was, quickly went in the direction indicated, with the phrasing of a telegram already in his head: "Henceforth my life is wholly yours, unto death, to do with what you will." On reaching the thick-walled house, which sheltered the post and telegraph office, he paused in horror: he

## SUNSTROKE

knew the town where she lived, he knew that she had a husband and a three-year-old daughter, but he knew neither her first name nor her surname! Several times in the course of the evening he had asked her, and each time she laughed and said:

"Why must you know who I am? I am Maria Green, Fairyland Queen. . . . Or simply the lovely stranger. . . . Isn't that enough for you?"

On the corner, near the post-office, was a photographic showcase. He looked steadily at a large portrait of a military man with elaborate epaulettes, with bulging eyes and low forehead, with surprisingly magnificent whiskers and expansive chest, all decorated with orders. . . . How absurdly ridiculous, how horribly ordinary it all was, because his heart had been vanquished—yes, vanquished, he understood it now—by this terrible "sunstroke," this intense love, this intense happiness! He glanced at a bridal couple—a young man in a long frock-coat and white neck-tie, his hair cut in hedge-hog style; on his arm, in bridal veil,—but he then diverted his gaze to the portrait of a good-looking, spirited girl in a student's cap perched awry. . . . Then, tormented by a harrowing envy toward all these strangers, *non-suffering* human beings, he began to look fixedly down the street.

"Where can I go? What can I do?" the insoluble, oppressive question persisted in his mind and soul.

The street was deserted. The houses were all alike, white, two-storied, middle-class, with large gardens, and they gave the appearance of being uninhabited; a thick white dust covered the pavement; all this dazzled; everything was drenched with the hot, flaming, joyous, seemingly aimless sunshine. In the distance the street rose, humped and pressed against the pure, cloudless, grayish horizon, reflecting lilac. There was something southern in this, reminiscent of Sebastopol, Kertch . . . Anapu. The thought of the last was particularly unbearable. And the lieutenant, with lowered head, screwing up his eyes against the light, with fixed gaze on the ground, reeling, stumbling, spur catching on spur, retraced his footsteps.

He returned to the hotel, shattered with fatigue, as if he had

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

performed a long journey in Turkestan or the Sahara. Gathering his last strength, he entered his large, desolate room. The room had already been cleaned, and her last traces removed—only a solitary hair-pin, forgotten by her, lay on the tiny table by the bed! He took off his jacket and glanced in the mirror: his face—the ordinary face of an officer, swarthy from sunburn, with whitish sunbleached moustaches and bluish-white eyes, seeming against the sunburn whiter than they were—now showed a distraught, insane expression, and in his thin white shirt with standing starched collar there was something youthful and infinitely pathetic. He lay down on the bed, on his back, and rested his dust-covered boots on the footboard. The windows were open, the curtains lowered, and from time to time the light breeze filled them, blowing into the room sultriness and the odor of hot roofs and of all that luminous, now quite desolate, mute, unpeopled world of the Volga. He lay with his arms under his head and gazed fixedly into space. His head held the dim picture of the remote south, of the sun, the sea, Anapu, and it was something fabulous—as if the town to which she had gone, the town in which she had doubtless already arrived, was like no other town—and with it all there ripened the persistent thought of suicide. He closed his eyes, and felt on his cheeks the trickle of pungent, hot tears—and at last fell asleep. When he again opened his eyes there was already visible, through the curtains, the darkening reddish evening sun. The breeze had died down, the room was stuffy and dry, as in a wind-furnace. . . . And he remembered yesterday and this morning precisely as if they had been ten years ago.

In no great haste he rose, in no great haste washed himself, then he pulled the curtains aside, rang for the servant, asked for a samovar and his bill, and for a long time he drank tea with lemon. Then he ordered a cab and had his luggage taken out, and, seating himself in the reddish, burnt-out seat of the carriage, he gave the servant a whole five rubles as a tip.

"It looks, Your Honor, as though I brought you here last night!" said the cabby cheerfully, as he seized the reins.



## SUNSTROKE

When they reached the pier, the blue summer night already darkened above the Volga and many varicolored flames were scattered upon the river and flames hung in the mast of the approaching steamer.

"Got you here just in time!" said the cabby ingratiatingly.

The lieutenant also gave him five rubles, then with ticket in hand went to the pier. . . . Even as yesterday there was the soft sound of the hawsers, and the light dizziness from the vacillation under foot; then came the flying end of the cable, the clamor of the seething waters under the wheels of the steamer receding from the impact. . . . And the sight of the much-peopled steamer, ablaze with light, and the smells of its kitchens, seemed to extend a warm welcome.

Another minute, and the steamer was under way, going up the river, in the direction in which it had borne her away that same morning.

Ahead of it, the dark summer sunset was rapidly fading; gloomily, dreamily and iridescently, it was reflected in the river, showing patches glimmering with tremulous ripples in the distance under the sunset, and the flames scattered in the darkness round the steamer went on receding and receding.

The lieutenant sat under cover on deck, conscious of having aged by ten years.

## In Egypt\*

MOE BRAGIN

*Moe Bragin was born in Russia and came to America at the age of four years. He is now a schoolteacher in New York City, but has spent several summers working on farms both as a relief from schoolroom confinement and because he is interested in agricultural problems as they affect human beings. His interests took him recently to Russia to study collective farms. His work has appeared in various magazines and in several previous anthologies, including Columbia Copy, and The Best Short Stories of 1932. His work has realism, sometimes harsh, and emotional power. In Egypt contrasts the attitudes of different types of Jews to a traditional observance.*

MOLLY GOTTLIEB staggered to her feet. At last the bathtub was clean as a plate. She wiped again the nose of a faucet.

Outside the rain was boiling like a full pot. Last Pesach<sup>1</sup> it had also rained; the one before, just as hard. Since the war every Pesach had been different, cold, wet, gloomy. It made one wonder whether the good God was going to change His mind about making another flood.

Crossing her arms over her moist breasts, she padded to the kitchen. Her blood turned cold. What was coming over her lately that she was getting a head like a cat's? Here she had spent a whole day going from one market to another for the best fish, and now she had almost let them burn. She added a little water to the fish and stirred. . . .

\* From *Opinion*. Reprinted by permission of Moe Bragin.

<sup>1</sup> Passover.

## IN EGYPT

Twelve chickens, forty pounds of breast meat, thirty pounds of winter carp, buffle, pike, and white fish . . . a world of money . . . and two crates of eggs, a real bargain, white as pearls. God knows enough matzoths,<sup>2</sup> farfel,<sup>3</sup> matzoth meal, russel<sup>4</sup> and wine, woman's wine and man's wine, and prune brandy. . . . Ach, she'd need it all. For tomorrow there would be even more guests—the manager of Chyam's insurance business and his whole family. Then her brother's chalastra<sup>5</sup> for the next day. Her son-in-law had written from his farm that Rachel and the children were coming next week.

She hurried to her bedroom and arranged for the hundredth time the curtains like rolled-up sleeves. Her new silk stockings were gone. Sarah, who was spending the evening with her sweetheart's family, must have taken them. She found an old pair, then slipped into a black dress with the brooch Joey had given her pinned to it; a sunny island with trees like feather dusters. Back to the kitchen where she scraped horse-radish and blessed the candles which licked her hands with their little playful tongues.

Chyam Gottlieb found her still busy when he rushed in from work. His corporation heaving, his full cheeks red, he stared at her. "Busy like a cockroach yet. Why don't you sit down for a minute, Old Shoes and Old Things?"

She reached over and shook a pot by its ear.

The door banged. The children began piling in. Daniel and his Jennie, Betty, Matty and his friend Bob, also a lawyer.

Matty came into the kitchen for a glass of water. With his soldier straightness and his bronze hair, he was the only one who resembled Joey in the slightest way.

"Tonight is Pesach, child."

"I know it."

"Are you going to work tomorrow?"

He softened his voice. "I've told you a dozen times already. I've a big case. I'll lose it if I stay home."

<sup>2</sup> Unleavened bread.

<sup>3</sup> Soup nuts.

<sup>4</sup> Beet juice.

<sup>5</sup> The whole gang.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

She bowed. "Ach, that Cossack, that Cossack."

Chyam was rummaging in the closet for his whiskey. "What Cossack are you talking about?"

"Since that Bob, that Cossack, comes here, our Matty's become a real goy."<sup>6</sup>

"Cossack! You're out of your mind from overwork." He went out, hugging his whiskey bottles.

The bell rang. In the hall they were greeting Betty's old piano teacher, his wife, and their Seymour.

"How's a Yiddel,<sup>7</sup> Uncle Abraham? And how's the young girl, Mrs. Breakstone?"

Her husband said, "She can fool you, not me. Underneath she's as old as Sarah when she got Isaac."

"My old horse in the kitchen looks like her grandmother. She's busy like a cockroach, and the sooner we get through with the seder<sup>8</sup> the better it'll be for the God inside here." He stroked his belly.

Mrs. Breakstone fished among the coats. "Sweet to the sweet, Mr. Gottlieb."

"Ooh, not on Pesach. It's a sin to eat candy." Jennie the school-teacher grabbed the box and hid it among the coats.

Uncle Abraham groaned, "I'm sorry. I forgot to tell Clara."

Tramping ahead of everybody, Chyam hollered, "Vowarts march, soldaten. Missus, come. All your lovely company is waiting. A fine missus you are."

She came in from the kitchen. "Excuse me, I was so busy. A good holiday to you all, a real good holiday."

Chyam bustled around. He rubbed his hands as though he had a piece of soap that would not lather. "You sit next to me, Mrs. Piano Teacher. Seymour, next to Betty, but keep the hands where they belong, heh, Molly."

She sat at the foot of the table near the kitchen door. She smiled at the joking.

<sup>6</sup> Gentile.

<sup>7</sup> A Jew.

<sup>8</sup> Passover Service.

## IN EGYPT

"This is the first what you call it I've been at for a century." Bob spoke as to a jury.

"You didn't miss much," was Matty's comment.

In the middle of the table was the seder dish with the egg, the chicken neck, the onions, the horse-radish, the paste of ground nuts and wine and matzoth meal which symbolizes the mud the ancient Jews had to work into bricks, and last the bitter herbs as a reminder of their misery in Egypt. Only Molly had an old prayer book, the rest of them booklets for the services issued as an advertisement by a local bank.

Chyam cleared his throat. "Do you expect me to go through the whole business, Molly?"

She didn't answer. She opened her prayer book.

"So you do expect me, Old Shoes and Old Things?" He rose, groaning from his chair. "A promise is a promise."

He dived into the blessing. "Blessed art Thou, O Eternal One . . . fruit of the vine . . . didst exalt us . . . with love . . . seasons of gladness . . . a holy gathering . . . memorial of departure from Egypt . . ."

He gurgled his wine and sighed. "Ach, it's good, Yiddilach.<sup>9</sup> Now you bother the Old Man, Abrahamchik."

The piano teacher stared at the Hebrew words. "I could read them once without the fly spots under them. Here she goes." He rolled his eyes.

Daniel read carefully like a child from a primer while Jennie smiled approvingly.

When it came to his turn, Matty squirmed.

"It won't poison you. Just because you read Ingersoll and that fellow Paine once, it won't kill you."

"I'm no hypocrite like you, lion tamer."

He stole a glance at his mother's face, then galloped through the blessing. The Cossack excused Seymour and himself because "this Hebrew's all Greek to us."

Clara Breakstone observed, "I think Catholic ceremonies are prettier. And why wear hats?"

<sup>9</sup> Little Jews (affectionate term).

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Her Seymour answered, "The Jewish God's no old lady that they have to take their hats off to Him. In the Bible He's always ripping up things. Jesus always makes me think of a girl or something."

In the meantime, Chyam was passing bits of horse-radish around. "After, we'll have the cologne—the onions."

"What do you do with this?" said Bob.

"Frame it," suggested Daniel.

Clara Breakstone pecked with her fork. "My dears, mine looks just like dentist filling."

"Bitterer than the devil," cried Matty. "Pass me a bit of the hemstitched cardboard, counsellor."

"All right, barrister." The Cossack flipped a piece of matzoth across the table.

Molly Gottlieb stretched out a hand. "Please, children, don't eat it yet. We must make the broocha<sup>10</sup> first."

"It makes the same difference, Ma. I'm burning up." He rammed the matzoth into his mouth.

Chyam was waving his hands like a band leader. "The blessing over the radish. Borooch, begin . . ."

Immediately after, Daniel began with the first of the Four Questions through his nose. "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

"Now for the answer." Following Chyam's lead, they all roared: "'In Egypt we were slaves. God brought us forth . . .'"

In a short while, he yelled, "Skip to page ten." He swallowed his words like hot beans, a hairy sickle of an eyebrow raised at his wife.

She rose suddenly and took the candles from the buffet.

Chyam stopped, mouth wide open. "Missus, where are you going? The-rest."

She dragged herself to the kitchen.

He scratched his head. "Well, children, skip to page twenty to the plagues, a plague take them."

<sup>10</sup> Blessing.

## IN EGYPT

Jennie began crowing:

"Skip, skip to the barber shop  
To buy a penny candy.  
One for you and one for me  
And one for sister Annie."

Bob and Matty were laughing over reproductions of the woodcuts illustrating the plagues. "Good Glory, they do look like those transfer pictures, cockamamies, we kids used to call them."

Chyam started slopping wine into a soup plate, a drop for "each one of God's fingers which he pinched the gypsies with. 'Blood, frogs, vermin, mixture, pestilence, boils . . . slaying the first born.' There, we are finished."

He stretched his neck. "Molly, we are out of the house of bondage. Old Shoes and Old Things, hey, Missus."

The three lawyers put their heads together and began to harmonize: "Where is the missus?"

She limped in, blinking.

"What is the matter?" he cried.

"It's only the horse-radish. Is that all? And Hallel?"<sup>11</sup>

"Hallel let the Jews with the long earlocks say in the synagogue."

She gathered up the pieces of horse-radish, the onion, and reached for the seder plate.

"Please, momsie, let me help you." Jennie jumped up.

Clara Breakstone whewed, "I get tired watching you, dear Mrs. Gottlieb. Let the boys be the handsome waiters."

"No use talking to her. She is stubborn as a field full of oxen with big horns. Missus, bring the fish, and I'll tell a story."

She brought the fish.

"Old Shoes and Old Things, when the Jews were slaves in Egypt and they came to Pharaoh and asked Pharaoh to let them go, the laugh was on them. But when the Jews were out of Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole army of gypsies was drowning in the Red Sea, the laugh was on him. When you asked me to keep

<sup>11</sup> A prayer said at all High Blessings.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

on with the seder and there was nothing to eat on the table, the laugh was on me. Now it's on you. . . . Tarabom, boom, boom. . . ."

They fell on the fish.

And then Jennie, mouth full, tried to squeak like a little-sized bear as she asked momsie why she was not eating.

"I eat when you eat, my child." She hurried back to the kitchen.

She felt more comfortable where it was quiet and clean, where she couldn't see them fress.<sup>12</sup> Before her closed eyes drifted all her brothers and sisters in the old home, gathered like summer bees about her father at the table in his girdled white linen robe and his high skull cap. Wasn't it a holy book that said the table in a good man's home is always an altar? Her mother with the big soft eyes in her wide silk dress, the whole house that smelled sweet as honey pots. Song and worship hour after hour, the children breathless, eager. How bitterly she had cried when she had been too sick one year to attend the seder. Even Dasha, the Christian servant girl, loved Pesach with its golden cleanliness and the matzoths she called holy cake.

She swayed and felt her breasts like two stones in her sacky dress weighing her down.

Whenever a guest appealed especially to him, Gottlieb took the greatest delight in making him drunk. "Now a little more brandy, Uncle Abraham, for the fish to swim in."

"Ach, Chyam my son, it tears like a cat in the throat." His cheeks were flushed, his eyes swimming.

"Come, don't be an alte Yiddinne."

"You're a regular bandit. Elijah the prophet will throw me out when he comes in and sees me like a pickle in a barrel."

"Don't be afraid to have a little mama."

"Why do you call the whiskey mama, my dear?"

Ah, that was what he'd been waiting for. He slipped her hands into his. "An easy question, Clara my gold. I call whiskey mama because papa loves it."

<sup>12</sup> To eat greedily.



## IN EGYPT

"When I was a boy," mumbled Abraham, "I had a voice. It wasn't bass. They wanted me to be a rooster to crow on God—in other words, a cantor." He waved a glass.

"Oh, the tomcat, the tomcat, the tomcat,  
This dog of a tomcat which never caught a mouse.  
I tied my shoes around his neck and chucked him in the river.  
Next morning, barefooted, as I stepped out with a shiver,  
I tripped upon him snoozing on the doorsteps of my house.  
Oh, the tomcat, the tomcat, the tomcat,  
May the devil take this dog of a tomcat of mine."

Soup . . .

"Stay here, missus, to hear the concert. Be happy, turn over this crazy world. Don't act like it's a big bitter onion."

She padded back for the chicken.

"A heart to you, Mrs. Piano Teacher. To Seymour and Betty wings to fly away together. To my married son a leg. Ach, to me this. She wants to sleep with the angels, but I still need you, Old Shoes and Old Things."

"That's the pope's nose," cried Bob.

Matty shot out his hand. "Let me have it." He speared it.

Bob jumped for it. As they were wrestling, Seymour grabbed it and shoved it into his mouth.

Amidst the laughter, Daniel announced, "It's time to fill the cup for Elijah the prophet. Open the door, Matty."

Matty snorted, "Don't be a fool."

"That's no cup," said Mrs. Breakstone. "It's a beaker. Where did you get it?"

"Joey got it—" Daniel caught himself in time.

His mother came in, stared at it, and sat down heavily.

"My dears, last Passover, it was funnier than a byrlesque. We were at a friend's. Her father is so from<sup>18</sup> he won't say 'pig.' When he opened the door for Elijah, who should walk in but the cat."

<sup>18</sup> Pious.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

A piece of chicken no bigger than a sparrow's tongue on her plate, she sat and stared at her hands. What was coming over her lately? She knew she was showing them how hurt she was. She had no right to when they were enjoying themselves. What harm can come of laughter? But she could not help herself. The whole house seemed full of dung and horses. Her head ached, her eyes seemed to be sharp glass shattered in her head. Her resentment had grown strong enough to hurt and frighten her. She couldn't understand it. Her guests and family. Doing nothing always made one think bad thoughts.

"Where are you going now, Molly? Why the hurry?"

"Who creeps never gets to God."

With a sigh, Chyam turned back to his job of pumping his friend full. "Come, Uncle Abraham, if you drink you die; if you don't drink you die. Better to drink and die. Have a little more of this Red Sea."

Uncle Abraham swallowed a little more of the Red Sea. He began babbling to himself. The rest dug into the compote of carrots and prunes with pieces of fat meat floating in puddles of gravy.

At last, stuffed to the gills, they staggered to their feet. They crawled to the living room. The Cossack held on to his watch-chain that hung down like a pot handle. "Holy Moses, I can't see my own shoes." Seymour chased giggling Betty and, having cornered her, tall as a sunflower running to seed, pinched and plucked her. He crashed suddenly down on one knee as though he were going to declare himself. He whipped out a pair of dice.

"The elevator boy in the office building gave me these. Twelve, I got a jury. Come on now again, baby needs a pair of shoes. One and one—snake's eyes. The devil, one and one again—Adam and Eve mated. . . ."

His father reeled in and flopped down on the dice. Gottlieb followed and rolled over him. Both began singing, "Bom, bom, bom . . . In Egypt we were slaves . . ."

Jennie lead the rest in a song and dance around them. "Ring around the rosies . . ."

## IN EGYPT

Somebody in the flat below hammered on the ceiling.

"Antisemites," bawled Chyam. He led the other two husbands to the window where Breakstone cracked the first joke. Then he ducked his head and burst out, "Oy, Insurance Agent, my husband ain't home. Maybe I can pay you in a different way."

Molly leaned back in the mohair chair near the portières. Betty was at the piano. She, too, wanted music. Something of a song, something like a baby with a sharp tooth that bites the breast and makes it bleed, yet is such a joy and light. A Yiddish song like, "What's the use of worrying about tomorrow? Today, too, has its packel of sorrow" or "Mama, Mama, never leave me."

She fell back. A great weariness swept over her. From far off her father's voice . . . some one must go with Dasha to the well to see that new pail for Pesach was not made unclean. Gaily, they tripped long, past the red cow licking her unsteady calf in the dooryard. A milk-white duck, floating on the pond like washed glass. And soon the trees, the lovely acacia trees . . . Then suddenly the harsh cries, the clamor of a gang of drunken peasants.

She shuddered and awoke. She had so much to do yet. As she strained up, she felt she should talk to her guests, not be dumb as a stick. To Mrs. Breakstone, who had lost her other son several years ago, yet so happy now—a free bird. "Yes, my dears, we intend going to Atlantic City this week-end. I'll get a chance to wear my oyster-colored knickers if the weather's a nice gentleman."

She plucked her by the sleeve. "Maybe you'll have a glass of tea."

"Thanks, thanks, my dear. I'm so full it'll soon come out of my ears."

Jennie flew into her arms. "Where are you going, little half-chick with the one eye, the one wing, the one poor little leg?"

She kissed the red full lips and hurried to the kitchen.

During her dish washing, Clara ran, Chyam after her with the album. "Whose picture is this? She can't believe it was taken a

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

week after I made you say yes, and we was married, Old Shoes and Old Things."

Tall and white as a birch tree in a garden, her face turned away; he at her feet like a red mushroom.

"You're dressed like a foreigner but how pretty, my dear." She turned to the first page of the album and wrinkled her nose.

Chyam burst out, "That's Joey's Yiddish. 'Zu mein liebe, teure Mama,'" Quickly he caught his breath and sobered up. He flushed mournfully, and pushed Mrs. Breakstone and himself out of the room.

Left alone, she finished her work. She crawled finally to the bedroom. Making a feeble effort to sit up, she fell on her face on the bed. It was terrible to lie down even for a second. It made you feel so tired and lazy. Better to stand and doze on the legs like a tired horse over the crib. Joey . . .

She doubled up as though she had been beaten under her heart. She stretched and a sweet pain seemed to be milking her heart.

Years before the horrible Christian war. One afternoon back from the doctor she had found her cousin Michael from Mexico in the flat. She hadn't seen him since her girlhood days in Russia.

"Do you know, Molly, at first I thought he was your husband so tall and handsome." And he had pointed to Joey, grinning. The fierce pain and joy that had swamped her heart at that moment had made her tremble from head to foot.

She tried to roll over on the bed and bury her face in a pillow.

"Please, Mama, let me take you for a little walk, for a spazier." Street after street, he as careful of her as though she were an ornament on the mantelpiece, shortening his stride because of her weak legs, leading her gently over the crossings. People stopped to stare at him, tall as a palm. With difficulty she could control herself from shouting on the corners, "Here is my own at last, the fruit of my body and my breasts, my only life, the blood that fills my heart. . . ."

Then the true God knows what a Yiddish, a lovely Yiddish, he spoke just for her sake. Often when her eyes hurt, he read the

## IN EGYPT

romances and the Dove's Post in the paper for her. Not one of the others ever wanted to say a word in Yiddish.

"Good Glory, Ma, this is America."

"You ought to learn English better. Let Jennie teach you."

"When Mrs. Breakstone comes, listen to her, Mama."

She burrowed in the pillow like a blind kitten for the teat.

Often she found him spending money on her that he had been saving for a dear book. To theatres, Jewish shows, and to restaurants where waiters looked like wedding guests in their black suits. There both of them ate for the first time salmon croquets. Mrs. Salmon the grocer called her. She made salmon croquets for him day in, day out.

He liked everything, not like the others. Still there were his favorites: gefullte fish, especially winter carp with lots of pepper; cowfoot sauce with toasted bread smeared with garlic; sabbath loaves with goose fat he liked to eat when he read or worked over his writings; corn bread with kimmel seeds. . . .

When she was operated on, he brought her flowers like a real bridal bouquet. He sat beside her bed in the hospital. "Little fool, now you have no money for yourself. And you work so hard. Bring flowers in your cheeks, not your hands."

She couldn't forget. Wanting to cry, she found her eyes dry as her breasts. She raised her hands and strained upwards. She fell back with a dry sob in her smothered helplessness.

Outside the rain made a sucking sound like a toothless mouth. All around her people seemed to be walking, their footfalls like that of stockinged feet, the voices of mourners. Outbursts of laughter from the living room. From the kitchen—"I pass. Hold, I'll see you, Uncle Abraham. Yes, so there was my father-in-law, a learned man. Why did the Jews decide to leave Egypt? Because they couldn't sleep with their wives. The other reasons are worth a pinch of snuff. Bom, bom, bom."

At the table they were playing cards; she saw him again with a book in his hands. "Listen, Mamele." It was by a Latin writer . . . Katz, Katzel, Cattle . . . She couldn't remember the name.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

She couldn't understand the strange words, but she understood too well the light in his eyes.

"A bit of poesia about the brother of the po-et, who died far away from his home and his friends." And as he read, she too felt the great sorrow of the strange writer. She put her hands over the ruffled hair like troubled flame.

Across the street, flags, music playing, people crowded on stoops laughing hysterically, throwing pieces of paper like flowers and butterflies. Over doors, "Welcome to Our Soldier Boy." In the gutter she fallen like a stone.

How she had pleaded with him. He was firm. He had to go. Wasn't he drafted? Then she told him how in Russia a cousin had evaded service in the army.

"Uncle was a butcher. One night Solomon went to the shop, took down the cleaver, and chopped off a finger like he was a chicken. They did not take him."

Jerking his head from her lap, Joey quivered.

"Yes, it was terrible. Another poor boy, who wanted to marry a rabbi's daughter, fell on his belly on a rock till he had a rupture. . . ."

He buried his face in his hands. He groaned as though to get rid of poison in his stomach. She could never forgive herself for that. For loving him so much she had said such horrible things. Yet, if he had only listened.

The day he left he had been brave until the last moment, brave while he had given her all his papers to hide, brave while he had kissed his brothers, sisters, joking father. When he had turned to her, however, the blood had been beaten out of his face. He had fallen on her breasts. God's sweetest candle gone forever. . . .

She moaned against the pillow. A great stick seemed to strike her against her knees. A black wheel caught the bed and room and whirled and whirled. The breath snored through her nose. Her body fell limp like a discarded dress.

It was a long time before she could open her eyes. She lay trembling. What now? Why should it go on this way without God? without anyone in whom she saw God? Why day after

## IN EGYPT

day, year after year, half in darkness, half in light, her body turning like one of those wheels in the laundry on the next street that pour filthy water, soap, clothes all over themselves?

She shuddered, hearing the rain scratching louder all the windows. It was a real flood as though at last with good reason He had changed His mind. She crept off the bed, sighing what a shame the windows would have to be washed again. As she put the room to rights, she found on the dresser grains of powder as though a moth had dusted herself there. With her handkerchief she rubbed at a speck on the glass that might have been made by a fly's leg.

At least, the earth was her daughter-in-law. She tottered to the door. Sinful, sinful woman, what horrible thoughts. And what were the children doing? Maybe they wanted tea and cake. And the guests . . . What was coming over her lately that her head was like a stupid cat's?

As she limped down the hall, talk dribbled from the living room. "Matty, give me that chocolate or by the hair on my chinny chin chin, I'll huff and I'll puff till I blow you in."

She held on to the wall until her head cleared. In the kitchen the neighbor and his two sons, Chyam, Breakstone.

"You have seven aces, I bet," the neighbor said to Chyam.

"I have a wife, an ace of a one," hollered Chyam. "Good morning, Old Shoes and Old Things. Hey, Uncle Abraham, wake up."

Uncle Abraham moved his ears and smiled foolishly. "I pass."

"Something I remember, missus, and that is you can make latkes<sup>14</sup> even God would put on pants and come down for. You know how the children love your latkes."

The others began shouting and banging on the table. "Latkes, latkes." They sang with Chyam:

"Latkes they call you.

From the stove they haul you.

In the mouth they maul you."

"Ach, but everything here looks so wet and dirty, mixed up like grass fallen from a cow's mouth."

<sup>14</sup> Pancakes.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

She swept the floor and put the empty whiskey bottles away. Then she got on her knees and took out of the closet the new frying pan, bright as glass, careful from the sweet-smelling pantry, a pot of honey-colored chicken fat and eggs white as pearls. She opened the knot on the sack of matzoth meal with her teeth. She mixed the meal with water and broke the eggs. As she stirred, she stared at the guttered candles with the wicks curved into question marks. The Breakstones, the Cossack, the neighbors, the children, and he, a dozen hungry mouths. Ach, how they would smack their lips.

"There, look I made my hundred and eighty. Hurrah, hurrah . . ." The nose of Chyam's broke on his shirt. Poking his thumbs into his vest, he roared, "Bom, bom, bom, In Egypt we were slaves. . . . Bom, bom, boom. . . ."



## The Crystal Ball\*

CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

*Charles Caldwell Dobie is a Californian. A former business man who decided to devote himself to writing in 1916, he has remained consistently true to his ideals. He is the author of several novels, plays, and volumes of short stories. His work has appeared in numerous anthologies. The Crystal Ball was his choice for this volume and it has not heretofore been included in any anthology.*

MARIA ESCOBAR was gathering a handful of pink camellias from the old bush drowsing against the west wall when she heard the tinkle of the bell at the garden gate. Only once in the entire seventeen years of her life had that bell been rung. The lock long since had rusted away to impotent senility, and, for the most part, the gate swung back and forth, back and forth, in the lusty afternoon winds that swept San Francisco from May to October. This previous ringing of the garden bell had ended in quite a flutter. Old Don Pedro Valencia, her uncle and her mother's eldest brother, had come up from his native Chile to pay a ceremonial visit to his sister. Although the gate had been blown wide open on that occasion, Don Pedro had scorned to enter under such easy and undramatic auspices. A bell at a garden gate was to be rung; it was a prelude to a processional of welcome. . . . Maria remembered how she had run down breathlessly to the gate to find a little shriveled, fiery old man wearing a black cloak with scarlet at the collar, for all the world like a troubadour in a comic opera. Three retainers stood behind him, equally in cloaks. Don Pedro Valencia took off his wide-brimmed

\* From *Harper's Magazine*, October, 1929. Reprinted by permission of Charles Caldwell Dobie and *Harper's Magazine*.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

hat, made a sweeping gesture in Maria's direction, bowed low, and fell over dead. . . .

The doctors had dismissed the whole matter on the score of heart failure. But Maria's mother, who always spoke her mind, said:

"Rubbish! . . . He died of chagrin and disappointment. Fancy pulling a rusty bell in the hope of having a half score of servants escort him in triumph to the house only to find a chit of a girl, with two front teeth missing, responding to all his clatter! . . . I know my brother. He was the world's vainest man."

That was seven years ago. And now, again, the bell at the garden gate was ringing. Was this another relation from Chile bent on a pageantry of welcome? . . . The tinkle came once more. Maria Escobar scurried to answer its summons as she crushed the camellias against her breast where they made a splash of coral-pink gaiety. Looking down at them as she hurried toward the gate she thought, "If it is another haughty relation, I have at least some flowers to scatter in his path!" And the grim memory of Don Pedro's entrance into the garden was swallowed up in the whimsey of imagining these perfect blossoms crushed under the heels of a swaggering kinsman.

She turned a corner and came to the main walk gloomy under the shadow of married cypress boughs bent and clipped into a vaulted hedge. The gate, swinging on its rusty hinges, loomed in a blaze of light at the corridor's end. At first she made out only the blur of a waiting figure that had neither form, age, nor sex. But, as she came nearer, she saw through the iron grill work of the gate that a man stood there. And, coming nearer still, she discovered that this man was short like a dwarf and, nearer still, that his back was twisted and, nearer still, that he had an extraordinarily handsome face.

She hurried forward and gained the gate just as the stranger was putting his hand upon the bell cord for a third time. He started back as if her sudden emergence from the gloom of the shaded walk had surprised him utterly.

"Ah," he sighed, as he took off his hat, "so you came at

## THE CRYSTAL BALL

last! . . . I was about to ring the bell once more and then go on my way again, disappointed. It is hard for me to pass a garden and find myself shut out."

Maria Escobar was at an age when any circumstance, not overwhelmingly sad, became an excuse for mirth. "Shut out!" she cried. "How absurd! Why, this gate has been swinging open for twenty years. You can see for yourself that the lock is broken." And she threw her head back charmingly as one peal of laughter after another issued from her throat.

The hunchback, peering through the gate's iron bars, stood watching her. His face was expressionless, but his two eyes held vivid glints of malice. She saw these sardonic lights and her laughter died. He opened the gate and stepped beside her.

"I—I hope I have not offended you!" she stammered.

"By your laughter? On the contrary. I feed on it! I devour it! It is the very thing that I am mad about. When a person laughs at me I kill him. Just as I always shatter the glass from which I have drunk a rare wine. . . . What a beautiful old garden this is. Come, you must tell me all about it! And you are lovely, too. Quite lovely. Is there no place where we can sit? I love to sit in a garden under a tree and watch leaves fall. One by one. One by one."

She thought, "Shall I cry for help?"

He guessed what was running through her mind. "There, you are afraid of me! Of *me*! It is my turn to laugh."

But, as a matter of fact, he looked hurt like a child that had been wounded. She felt ashamed.

"So you want to sit in a garden, under a tree, and watch the leaves fall. Very well, I know just the spot."

She went on ahead down the avenue of married cypresses. The hunchback followed after. She felt her heart beating with strange excitement.

A little to one side of the camellia bush were two benches and a round iron table. In the old days when the garden was in its prime the women of the family used to sit there in a circle, bending over their embroidery frames. Nearby, there was a niche

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

in the stone wall which held a figure of Santa Barbara. It was a very gay, friendly figure in a bright blue cloak and head scarf.

"I shall take this strange man there," thought Maria. "Surely he cannot harm me with a saint looking on."

A branch from an elm tree cast a pattern on the table top, but, for the most part, the tempered sunshine danced on a carpet of thin shadow.

The hunchback sank down on one of the benches and tossed his hat upon the table. Maria Escobar sat upon the second bench opposite him, letting the camellias she was carrying fall into her lap. Even at noon the glinting sunlight was far from unpleasant as it nimbly touched forehead and cheek and shoulder.

"Do not tell me that you live in this delightful spot alone," said the hunchback.

"Scarcely," she returned boldly. "I have my mother and a cousin, Rosa Ortega, who tends her, and an old cook in the kitchen."

"Four women! . . . Your mother is very old, is she not?"

"Old and ill. She scarcely ever leaves her room."

"We have not told each other our names. Mine is Flavio Minetti."

"And mine is Maria Escobar."

"Maria Escobar. Maria Escobar!" He took out a little leather book from his pocket, and a stub of pencil. "Maria Escobar," he said a third time as he wrote in the book.

"You are writing my name in your book," said Maria. "Why?"

He gave her an engaging smile. "I add it to the list of people who have laughed at me. People whom I have killed."

How very mad he was! She should not have let him into the garden. Still, he must be harmless. He was looking at her intently, as if in expectation of an answer. She decided to be bold. "I have laughed at you," she said gravely, "but you have not killed me."

"As if you could escape!" he said.

"I did not even laugh at *you*," she found herself saying as she stripped one of the camellia blossoms of its leaves. "I laughed at

## THE CRYSTAL BALL

what you did, but not at you. Confess, it was ridiculous, ringing a garden bell when the gate stood open!"

"Everything in life is ridiculous!" he answered testily. "Moreover, I do not scratch for motives. Laughter is laughter. I make my own laws and my own penalties. That is my right as a free person. Your right as a free person is to outwit me."

She had an impulse to rise and flee. But she remembered hearing an old wives' tale about a child who ran from a savage dog and was torn to pieces. She looked at Flavio Minetti boldly as one by one she stripped the camellia stems of their superfluous leaves and laid them on the iron table.

"I know! You are trying to frighten me," she said.

He looked at his little book. "Maria Escobar!" he repeated caressingly as he added a flourish to what he already had written.

"As a matter of fact," Flavio Minetti continued, as he slipped the little book back into his pocket, "this is not the first time I have seen you. Do you remember that Sunday afternoon following the Easter mass which they said in the old Mission? I was passing by, very much as I was passing by this garden to-day, and I thought, 'Why not step inside and see what there is to see? The mass is over and it will be pleasantly empty and melancholy.' Not that a church means anything to me. But I like old buildings. Do you know why? Because there are ghosts in them." He dropped his glance and she crossed herself hurriedly. "I went in that Sunday looking for ghosts and I saw you, praying before a shrine. When you left I followed you to the garden gate. I would have rung the bell that morning but there were the figures of other people at the end of the cypress walk. A stooped woman, for one, with an attendant on either side—walking up and down, up and down."

"That was my mother!"

Flavio Minetti paid no attention to this remark. "A stooped woman with an attendant on either side—walking up and down, up and down," he repeated; "and just beyond the gate was the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

figure of a man lying face downward in the path." He stopped quite suddenly and stared into space.

Maria drew in a sharp breath. "Did he have on a black cloak with scarlet at the collar?"

"A black cloak with scarlet at the collar," he assented.

"And a hat with a wide brim?"

"The hat was in his hand."

"That was my uncle, Don Pedro. He died face downward in that path seven years ago."

"Naturally. I suspected that at once. You see, old gardens have ghosts in them also. I remember a garden in London, once. There was a beautiful woman in that garden, too. . . . I have often thought I should like to go back and see whether her ghost walks up and down its stone walks, between the primroses and hollyhocks."

"You mean she died?" inquired Maria, timidly. Her heart was fluttering.

"Naturally, since she laughed at me."

"You are ridiculous!" cried Maria Escobar, sharply. "If you really go about killing people you should find a better excuse than that!"

"All excuses for killing people are ridiculous," returned Flavio Minetti. "There was that Englishman, Wainewright. The friend of Charles Lamb. He poisoned women who had thick ankles."

Maria Escobar laughed again. "Well, there is some point to that," she answered, as she looked down at her slender legs.

"Ah," said Flavio Minetti, "you are vain like all women. But you are very pretty, too. I forgive you!" And he gave her a warm, indulgent glance that made her think, "What rubbish he has been talking! He is just a harmless creature with a warped back. How is it possible for him to kill me? It is just a joke he has—a warped joke like his back!" Suddenly she felt sorry for him. "After all, he is one of God's creatures!" she thought and she asked him quite simply if he would not like a glass of sherry.

"Sherry!" he echoed, in a tone that left no question as to his delight.

## THE CRYSTAL BALL

She left him, walking slowly into the house, to show that she was not in the least hurried or afraid of him. When she came back she had two glasses with slender, twisted stems, upon a silver tray. A decanter was in the center, filled with wine the color of mahogany until the sun caught it and then it turned to fire. She poured one glass almost to the brim until it looked like a red tulip that had sprung up like magic. Flavio Minetti put out both hands to receive it.

She merely covered the bottom of the second glass, raised it to her lips, and set it down again. But Flavio Minetti sipped and sipped, drawing in his breath, as if the wine's fragrance was as precious as its taste.

"This wine must be very old," he said. "It has a rare perfume. It smells of summer."

"It is from a cask my great grandfather brought from Spain. Someone put it in a far corner of his cellar, and it stood there for years unnoticed."

Flavio Minetti nodded his head. "Most fools toss off wine as if its taste were its chief virtue. They think nothing of its bouquet." He passed the wine glass back and forth under his nose as he shivered with delight. "I cannot imagine wine without fragrance. Nothing that lacks perfume has any meaning for me. Take those flowers on the table. They are beautiful, they are exquisite, but they are as dead as a woman without a soul."

Maria Escobar picked up a single camellia and gazed at it sadly. "I have often wondered why such a beautiful flower is without perfume. . . . You are right, it has no soul."

Flavio Minetti leaned forward and laid his glass upon the silver tray. "Come, I will give it a soul," he said, as he put out his hand to her.

She gave him the blossom. He felt in an inner pocket and drew out a tiny leather case which he spread out on his lap. It contained a row of vials held in place by loops of leather. He slipped one of the vials from its security, uncorked it, and let a single drop of colorless liquid fall into the coral-pink center of the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

camellia. The drop glistened momentarily like a crystal jewel, then disappeared.

"There," he said as he passed the flower back to her, "the miracle is accomplished."

She held the blossom on a level with her full, ripe lips and drew in deep breaths. She had never smelled a perfume so exquisite. It gave her a strange ecstasy. She knew that she was sitting in her garden, yet her spirit seemed floating up, up. Suddenly she realized that time and space meant nothing. Would she sit in this garden forever with a hunchback opposite her, watching the leaves fall? . . . Yes, they were falling now, in spite of spring, hurried to premature deaths by a cold wind from the sea. The figure of the hunchback, the leaves dancing in the sunlight, the shrine in the garden wall grew remote. . . . She came to her senses with a shiver. Fog was riding in on the wings of twilight. The seat in which Flavio Minetti had sat was empty. But the decanter of sherry and two empty glasses stood on the table. A camellia was in her hand, its petals blackened and shriveled. Remembering, she raised it to her nostrils. Its perfume was gone.

All next day the memory of the perfumed camellia filled her with an exquisite longing. She kept the fading flower that had been ravished so quickly of its brief soul in a silver vase on a table beside her bed. She had a sad hope that some miracle would restore its lost fragrance. She wondered whether the hunchback would ever return to sit in the garden. If he came again would he bring the little leather case with its row of mysterious vials? Her heart beat quickly. A week went by and she lost hope, but one morning she heard the ridiculous tinkle of the bell at the garden gate. She flew down the path, cool under its cypress hood. Flavio Minetti was waiting for her.

"Confess," he said, "you thought I should never come again! You thought that you would escape me!"

In the tumult of his return she scarcely noticed the irony that



## THE CRYSTAL BALL

he put into these simple words. Her one thought was, "Has he brought the little leather case?"

Presently they were sitting as before under the branch of elm tree, the table between them. The early morning mist had parted, the sun came out warmly, white butterflies twinkled from flower to flower.

He settled himself back in his garden seat as he threw his hat upon the table. A sigh of exquisite content fluttered from him. "This is the first time that I have sat in the sunshine since we parted," he said in explanation of his delight.

"And what have you been doing?" she asked.

"Reading an old book. It has all the secrets of the Borgias. . . . Ah, what wonderful people they were in that day! What magnificent murderers! Such skill! Such subtlety! Such finesse! There are moments when I think that I must have lived then. It comes over me like the fragment of a clouded dream that I must have been a jester in those days. In some ducal court. It was the service that they put twisted backs to, then. . . . I can see myself hopping nimbly from jest to jest, in cap and bells, making them laugh. Can you not see me—a misshapen thing capering grotesquely while they laughed! How I must have hated them and their laughter! How I must have envied my masters the power and skill to murder swiftly where they would. Have you never heard it said that all clowns shrink from the mob's laughter? . . . There was a famous clown in Paris who killed himself because he could not bear it! What a fool! What a fool, to kill himself and die unrevenged! . . . Still, if he comes back again to earth as I have . . . who knows! One has time to learn so many things in the silence of eternity!"

She sat there before him, tremulous with inarticulate longing. What did she care for the secrets of the Borgias? Or the broken heart of clowns? Had he brought the little leather case with its row of mysterious vials?

"I sometimes think," the hunchback went on, "that every person whom I kill must have laughed at me in that life when I had neither the skill nor the courage to undo them. I can see

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

you—a slender princess, in the Florentine villa of your father, laughing as I made myself into a snug ball and, like a porcupine, rolled down the carpeted stairway leading to the throne. . . . Or were you the daughter of a French marquis new-come from Paris, or an Infanta of Seville with your black hair shrouded in a foam of lace? . . . No matter, you laughed at me! And your beauty stabbed me as harshly as your mirth."

Why could she not bring herself to ask him quite simply and naturally if he had with him the thing she desired? She was like a lover abashed at speaking the precious name. But she had a lover's slyness, too. "Did you provide souls, then, for the pink flowers in my hair?" she asked.

He shook his head. "In those days I had only the power to create laughter." He looked at her with a strange satisfaction. "Is the cask of sherry empty that your great-grandfather brought from Spain?"

She did not answer him but she rose at once to fetch a decanter of wine. It was as if he had said, "Give me my heart's desire and I will give you yours."

She came back with the decanter of wine and one slender glass upon its twisted stem. "One glass?" he inquired challengingly. Still she said nothing. He rose and poured himself a brimful drink, leaning forward to inhale its fragrance. He sipped at the glass's rim, then took it in his hands and held it out to her. "It is more wonderful to-day than last time," he half whispered. "Or has my ardor grown? . . . What a strange thing desire is! It feeds alike on bounty or impoverishment."

She knew, now, that he was worrying her, that he had the leather case tucked snugly away in his pocket. She gave the proffered glass a disdainful smile and shook her head. "It does not tempt me!" she said.

His eyes glittered. She could see that he had read her thoughts. He drank the wine with diabolical slowness. . . . At last, the glass was almost empty. Only a single drop glowed rubylike where stem and bowl met.

"There is a wine in Munich touched with the scent of flowers,"

## THE CRYSTAL BALL

he said. "The Germans drink it in May. It is too cloying for my taste, but you would like it. . . . I cannot give you May wine but I can give this drop within my glass a breath infinitely sweeter."

He reached in his pocket and brought out the little leather case. At the sight of it she trembled all over. "Is—is it the same perfume that gives dead flowers souls?"

"Not quite. I have worked all week to make this fragrance less fleeting. For hours, day and night, I have sought to imprison taste as well as smell within it." He uncorked a vial and let a crystal tear fall into the drop of wine. She snatched the glass from him, drawing great breaths from its shallowness. Presently she felt the wine upon her tongue. "It is tasteless!" she said accusingly.

He rubbed his hands together in glee. "Ah, what a greedy nose you have! It leaves nothing for your other senses!"

"Give me more!" she cried. "Do you understand, if I do not have more I shall die!"

"It will be the same in any case," she heard him say. . . . The vial was against her hand and its moisture at her finger tip.

This time the perfume did not bring her even a transient insensibility but she felt a murky content. All desire, all hope, all pain seemed fused into a dulled rapture. Flavio Minetti sat in the mottled sunshine drinking glass after glass of sherry. His lips moved and words escaped him, but she was not conscious that they had meaning; yet the cadence of his voice beguiled her like the drip of a fountain in the darkness. When he rose to leave she did not follow him through cypress shadows to the garden gate.

She saw that he had left the vial upon the table. She struggled to rise, to call him back. She felt terrified at the thought of so much vicious ecstasy within reach. She heard the crunch of receding boots on the graveled path, the sad groan of rusty hinges, the feeble clang of iron striking against an impotent lock. She sat trembling, covering her face with her hands. The sight of the vial filled her with a strange horror. Suddenly she determined

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

to smash it into a thousand fragments. She came to her feet and dragged her leaden weight to the table.

But at the supreme moment her will failed. She drew away without so much as touching the object of her terror. Instead, with a supreme effort, she turned upon her heel and fled into the house.

That night Maria's mother said, "Something is amiss with my eyes. When I look at you, Maria, your face has a greenish color. I once had a duenna when I was a young woman who looked that way. She died soon after. They say an enemy poisoned her."

"God help me!" thought Maria, but she said nothing.

Before she went to bed she looked into her glass. Her mother was right! She fell upon her knees and prayed fervently. Her prayers gave her peace; she slept soundly until midnight. She awoke to the pain and rapture of longing. Her first thought was of the vial left upon the table in the garden. She had a sudden terror lest it should be gone. She rose, thrusting her feet into fleece-lined slippers. The jagged stones in the garden path cut through her thin soles but she scarcely felt them. The sharp relief of finding the tiny bottle where the hunchback had left it made her giddy. Hugging the treasure close to her breast, she floated back to her room again.

She lighted a candle and spread out a wisp of handkerchief upon which she let three drops of the precious extract fall. Then she threw herself upon her bed, covering her face with the fragment of linen steeped in this perfume of paradise. . . . The sun was shining in an east window when she awoke.

As the days went by and the vial was emptied drop by drop Maria Escobar felt a sick terror. What would she do when the perfume was gone? If only she had asked the hunchback where he lived! But it was too late now. There was nothing to do but wait and hope for his return. Daily her mirror gave out disquieting revelations; the note of green in her face deepened, her eyes sank deeper beneath her brows, her lips were flecked with black patches. She went about the house hugging the shadows,

## THE CRYSTAL BALL

screening her face when either her cousin, Rosa Ortega, or the old cook came upon her. Every night at table her mother commented on the illusion of strange color that her failing eyesight gave to her daughter's face. Rosa Ortega, in attendance, said nothing. She was a timid soul well schooled in the repression that is the accepted lot of a poor relation and spinster in the bargain. But Maria knew from the frightened sadness of her glance that she suspected something was amiss.

Finally one day this submerged soul gathered the courage to speak. Maria was sitting in the full glare of noonday before the iron table in the garden. For the past week she had been sitting there for hours, steeped in an idleness that was a curious mixture of apathy and disquiet. She scarcely owned it to herself, but she was waiting for the tinkle of the bell at the garden gate. Her cousin fluttered past like a bedraggled black bird, went a few paces beyond, hesitated, and retraced her steps.

"Maria Escobar," she began with quivering respect, "you frighten me. For days I have been watching you. There is something unholy about you—there is something unholy in the way your eyes burn. I am a miserable creature, God knows, but I am not quite a fool. Nor am I old like your mother and given to blaming what I cannot explain on my infirmities. When I see the color of the tomb in a young girl's cheeks, I know that it is there and not in a trick of spent eyesight. . . . If your body is unsound let me send for a doctor. If it is your soul that is sick—there is a remedy for that, too."

At the mention of her soul Maria Escobar trembled. This disquiet made Rosa Ortega bold. For the first time in her life this timorous creature dared to speak freely what was in her mind. She came a step closer to Maria and she shook her upraised finger in her cousin's face as she said:

"I know the very day that this affliction came to you. I heard the garden bell tinkling and I saw you leading a twisted man up the path. An hour later he had gone, but I found you sitting where you sit now. I called to you, and you did not speak."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"How dared you!" cried Maria Escobar, beside herself with rage. "How dared you spy on me!"

But Rosa Ortega stood there unabashed and unfrightened. "I called to you, and you did not speak!" she repeated. "And in your face was a dreadful look." She crossed herself piously. "A dreadful look such as people wear who have seen forbidden things."

Maria Escobar began to laugh. "Forbidden things! . . . How little you know! On that day I saw Paradise."

"Hush!" said her cousin. "You must not say such things! To sell yourself to the devil and talk of Paradise! For shame!"

"You lie!" cried Maria boldly, but inside she was quivering with fright.

"I tell only the truth," returned Rosa with the appalling calm of self-righteousness. "Your twisted friend came a second day. But this time he did not escape me. When he left this garden I followed him. I followed him for blocks and blocks, and finally he halted before the door of cheap lodgings, and the stairway swallowed him up. I stood in the street bewildered. I was afraid to go farther. While I hesitated a youth came down the stairs. I thought, 'He can tell me what I wish to know.' So I went up to him and said, 'Who is the hunchback that just went inside?' He shook his head. 'Only God knows. I lodge next to him and far into the night I can hear him moving about—making strange noises. Once I saw into his room. It was like the workshop of a chemist. But he is not a chemist. I think he brews charms. He is either the devil himself or he is in bondage to him. Have nothing to do with him if you value your soul. For myself, I am moving away to-night!'"

Rosa Ortega threw out a look of triumph. For the first time in her life circumstance had given her the center of the stage, and she was squeezing her moment dry.

As for Maria Escobar, she sat in a sly mask of silence. When she did speak her voice was shaken between apprehension and hope. "You—you mean you know where he lives?" she asked. "You could go to it?"

## THE CRYSTAL BALL

"Naturally. He lodges at the Hotel des Alpes Maritimes."

A strangled note of joy came from Maria Escobar. Her one thought was to be up and off in search of him. She made as if to rise, but a strange numbness was in her limbs. She fell back panting. "I am dying!" flashed through her mind. "I shall never leave this seat again!"

Rosa flew to her side. "Maria, Maria!" she screamed, shaking her.

"Hush!" commanded her cousin with sudden calm. "Hush! Or my mother will hear! . . . Listen to me, Rosa. You are a wicked woman. It is you who have sold yourself to the devil with your horrid thoughts. I have been dying for weeks—for weeks, do you hear! There is nothing that can save me. But there is one who can grant me a brief respite from my pain. It is the twisted man you followed. Go to him and beg him to come once more and see me. Tell him how I suffer!"

"Oh, Holy Mother of God!" cried Rosa, dropping to her knees.

"Do not wait! Go at once! See how my hand is burning. I am on fire, Rosa."

"Maria—Maria Escobar, why have you not told me before? Let me first go for a priest. Think, if you should die unshriven!"

"Later! when the pain is dulled, Rosa, my darling. . . . Go, I beg of you, or I shall die before even a priest can shrive me."

"Oh, Holy Mother of God!" cried Rosa Ortega again as she rose and fled down the avenue of married cypresses and past the garden gate.

Maria Escobar felt in her bosom and drew out the vial. It was almost empty. She lifted it slowly toward her face, as she threw her head back. She could feel her nostrils quivering. But all else—her arms, her legs, even her lips were numb.

She sat there in a state of curious physical stupor but her mind glowed like an ember. Never had the colors in the garden seemed so poignant, and even its sounds were vibrant. She could hear the hurtle of falling leaves and the wings of white butterflies beating together. Within her, memory surged up in waves bathed

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

in the silver of dead moons suddenly come to life—dead moons that were like lives she once had lived. She saw the splendors of courts in which she had moved, the brocades, the silks, the jewels she had worn. She listened again to the lutes of troubadours who had wooed her. From her balcony she threw garlands about the necks of returning conquerors. The hours she had suffered, the hours she had starved, the hours she had shivered in rags, the hours she had wept were wrapped in the glittering sheen of supreme moments of existence. And, yet, some superconsciousness told her that this ecstasy was as fragile as a crystal ball tossed into the air. It caught all the colors of the sun and sky, but one false move and it would lie shattered on the grass. Through all this gay fabric of the past ran one dull thread of apprehension. What if Rosa Ortega did not find the hunchback? What if he had quitted his lodgings—or worse still, the town?

To be won back to life now; to wake slowly from the dream, to return to the dullness and pain of living—the prospect made her heart stand still. Were minutes or hours or centuries slipping by? She could not have said. Rapture cannot measure time but it can hug it close. Maria Escobar let her two white hands flutter toward her breast as if to keep the flashing moments captive forever.

She did not hear the tread of the hunchback or the flutter of Rosa Ortega's skirts coming down the path. But, quite suddenly, they were before her like two enslaved apparitions. She turned her face toward Flavio Minetti:

"Send my cousin away!" she said.

He spoke to the frightened kinswoman. She hesitated but presently she moved toward the house, sobbing.

"Have you brought another vial?" asked Maria.

He opened a closed fist and she saw what she desired, warm within his grasp. They exchanged significant glances.

"Well!" she half sighed.

He put the vial upon the iron table and took a step toward her.



## THE CRYSTAL BALL

"Maria Escobar," he said gently. "You are upon the threshold of death. A dozen drops more of this perfume and everything will be over. . . . Does not life call out to you?"

She shook her head.

"You are ravaged, it is true, Maria Escobar," he went on. "But I can still save you!"

"Save me!" she echoed fretfully. "Must I laugh at you again?"

He shrugged. "I have a whim to reprieve you. It is my privilege. Think, you are young—a virgin. You have not yet lived!"

Waves of memory bathed in the silver of dead moons again swept her. "What is *one* life to me?" she answered.

"I cannot shake you?"

"No!"

"So be it then," he said.

She saw him step back toward the table, she saw him lift the vial in midair. It caught the colors of the sun and sky as the crystal ball of her happiness had. He seemed to be regarding it intently. What if it should drop from his hand and fall shattered on the hard surface of the table.

"Quickly!" she cried and she held out her cupped palm to him.

She felt the cool drops fall one by one on her parched skin. She shivered with delight. When he had finished he restrained the impatient gesture of her arm.

"I am going at once, Maria Escobar," he said. "By the time I reach the garden gate everything will be over. If you repent you have but to dash the perfume on the ground. Or hold it up for the sun to devour!"

"I shall not repent!" she answered in a whisper.

He took off his hat and made her a bow as twisted as his back. She felt like laughing for the last time as he turned upon his heel and left her.

Slowly she lifted her palm. Her head bent forward to meet it half way. . . . She heard the hurtle of falling leaves and the wings of white butterflies beating together.

A black cloak with scarlet at the collar came from the shadows of the married cypresses.

## Miss Letitia's Profession \*

LUPTON A. WILKINSON

*Lupton A. Wilkinson was formerly a publicity man in New York City, who now has devoted himself to writing articles and short stories. Miss Letitia's Profession brought him an amazing fan mail and is probably his best-known short story.*

### I

✓ **M**ISS LETITIA MALLOW's profession and her appearance were utterly incongruous. The only comparable example is the trite one of the hirsute male who chews a black cigar and curses through ginny breath as he edits "Advice to the Lovelorn."

Miss Letitia's mind, this bright afternoon, was not on her source of income. Her thoughts seldom dwelt there, except when she was actually at work. Her professional self was a sort of gold-paying Letitia Hyde to a very delicate Miss Jekyll.

It would be difficult to exaggerate that impression of delicacy as the slight figure bent over a glowing petunia bed. Petunias were a good deal like weeds, Miss Letitia decided, grubbing among the roots with a tiny white hand; next year she would have less of them. The sunny garden looked like a color print of some New England yard: it had variety of color, yet all the lush rows were prim, geometrical, old-fashioned.

Somehow, this garden had got itself transplanted, as it were, to Long Island, where it warmed the left lawn of a large, modern, pleasant house.

Miss Letitia's silvery curls, as she bent over the petunias, hung

\* From *The North American Review*, July, 1934. By permission of Lupton A. Wilkinson.

## MISS LETITIA'S PROFESSION

a little forward, to either side of a face of which the skin was white like incredibly thin china. Her gray silk dress, with a skirt that widened at the bottom and ruching at the sleeves, resembled a cut from that old arbiter of fashion—*Godey's Ladies' Book*.

The truth was, since the doctor had talked to her so plainly, Miss Letitia expended decreasing attention on the big house, the coupons that the bank clipped and entered in her pass-book, and the recent newspaper hubbub over the work that remained so easy and took so little out of her. Her garden and her friends, in the new knowledge, seemed more important.

Studies of herself in her rosewood mirror had failed to alarm. The added pallor she had lately acquired caused her, she concluded, to look more and becomingly fragile.

"Feeble," was the word in John the gardener's mind as he approached on a green inner path and coughed. The word would have made Miss Letitia delicately furious; the cough flustered her.

"Why, John," she exclaimed, straightening up, "I thought you had gone downtown." She had given the yard man and both the house servants the afternoon off, so she could putter among the flowers.

She did look absurdly fragile, standing with garden soil on her hands, as if a housemaid had neglected to tidy one of the parlor ornaments.

"I was just going," said John, shiny with pressed serge, clean shoes, scrubbed face and Sunday hat. "But, ma'am, you won't find a mite o' grass in them petunias. No later than Tuesday morning—"

"I know," Miss Letitia confessed apologetically. "I was only—fiddling."

"The doctor—" began John. He had tended that garden, and the rose arbor on the other side, for ten years, and had privileges.

"I know," Miss Letitia surrendered. "I know."

She stepped past a perennial border, seated herself in a twisted-wood seat under a Japanese maple and watched the gardener

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

depart virtuously among the flowers—out a white gate flanked by a fence supporting honeysuckle.

Over the blossoms John could be seen tilting his hat to a holiday angle.

### II

Miss Letitia's choice of her incredible profession had come about in a circuitous way, impinged by the irony life dealt to her brother, Rodney Mallow.

Rodney was Yale '90; he was thin, anaemic-looking, wore spectacles and blinked through them. He lacked the alertness that ambushed behind Miss Letitia's gentle blue eyes.

Rodney piddled at writing six years, but his futility did not matter, for Rodney, Sr., had left his children a moderate income, a chest of silver from England and a cottage in Connecticut.

Miss Letitia saw the panic of 1897 wipe the investments as blank as the paper that reposed so long in her brother's typewriter. Shuddering a little, she took in sewing. She petted Rodney firmly into the ranks of job-seekers. He trod countless literary avenues and bypaths, wandering finally into the building owned by a very large company that published many magazines on rough paper. The editor-in-chief wanted to save five dollars on a salary; Rodney took the job at twenty-five a week. The name of his particular charge was *Hot Clues*.

Miss Letitia sewed in and sewed out. The cottage sprouted a lop-sided mortgage. In 1907 Rodney's salary was raised to thirty dollars; in 1916 to thirty-five.

One day—it must have been about 1920—the editor commuted home in disconsolate mood.

"I'm afraid I'm going to be discharged," he announced gloomily. "*Hot Clues* is losing circulation every month."

Miss Letitia knew at once, with woman's instinct for direct thinking in a crisis, that what he feared must not happen. It must not be permitted to happen.

"What's the matter, dear?" She laid down her sewing.

"It's this true story craze," Rodney explained. "Only a few writers have the knack of it yet, and they're in great demand."

## MISS LETITIA'S PROFESSION

I can't buy the product at the rate Doag and Hart permit me to pay authors, and our competitors are just eating us up."

Miss Letitia, mind grappling with this alien problem, recalled a full-page advertisement she had seen in the newspaper, heralding a new magazine.

"You mean," she asked, blushing at the phrase, "*Confessions of Love?*"

"No. No. We use crime material only. Reminiscences of crooks is what we need. But it's the same principle."

"Why, Rodney!" Miss Letitia was alarmed. "Will you have to—to seek out criminal individuals and persuade them to write their memoirs?"

"Most of them couldn't write a pardon letter to the governor," Rodney deprecated. "Trained hacks invent and write the material and the magazines sign likely names."

"I shouldn't think it would be very difficult," Miss Letitia observed, "if you can just make it up."

There followed a time of secret but keen excitement. The very next day the little woman from the cottage, whom everybody liked, walked down to the railroad station and persuaded the newsstand proprietor to let her have his left-over magazines, the very cheap ones, of which he had only to send back the torn-off covers to secure refund credit. Later, she discovered to her joy that there existed glossaries of criminal slang. When points puzzled her, she wrote sacheted, hand-script letters to prison wardens and chiefs of police, who chuckled and replied. She made all-day trips to New York and browsed in the Public Library.

Miss Letitia read hundreds of thousands of words on tawdry subjects. The words fascinated her; the topics did not distress; these true stories were evidently fairy-tales for adult readers with an odd turn of mind.

She decided to try her hand first at a career of safe-robbing (as she called it then) inspired by a news item detailing a local merchant's misfortune. Quickly she learned that nitroglycerine was soup; that a safe was a pete and the criminal specialist involved was a peterman. Her investigations were drawn far afield.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

She found that safe-blowers began as punks, or apprentices to hoboos, and here was a whole new language. Dinging for begging. Bugs, jiggers, saps, high heels, splints, dummy gags and throw-me-outs; all devices for faking physical ills and arousing sympathy. She was the first purist to write "yeag" instead of "yegg," tracing the word to the German *jaegar*, a hunter.

All this in the realm of fancy. Her Dr. Jekyll self, the real Miss Letitia, never believed that actual human beings manufactured wounds with lye to draw tears and roast beef from housewives.

"The writing part is simple, just as I thought," she explained at the necessary time to Rodney. "You give the boy a drab background, city or small town, to show that fate was against him. Then you conduct him through a long series of crimes. No connecting thread is needed—no plot. You spice the narrative by relating it in slang and interposing frequent physical conflict. After two or three prison sentences, the hero reforms, and is telling the story of his life to warn others. That's the formula."

Rodney blinked through his spectacles, amazement bordering on horror.

Soon Miss Letitia was supplying the magazine with as many as three true stories in a single issue. She grew accustomed to seeing her work under such signatures as "Mike the Dip" or "Daggers Moran." When, in 1925, gangland stories leaped to popularity, she made the transition easily, becoming the amanuensis of imaginary gunmen, hijackers and narcotic racketeers. Always the research for new vocabulary fascinated her, maintained enthusiasm and nourished facility of pen.

Through the years Miss Letitia's enterprise garnered cumulative results. The circulation of *Hot Clues* returned to vigor; Rodney Mallow was permitted to raise the rate of pay from half a cent a word to three-quarters, then munificently to a cent. His own salary increased, by dribblets, to fifty dollars a week.

Other editors learned of the diminutive penmaiden to crime. It became advisable to live on Long Island, so they could confer with her readily. In 1927 she received her first cheque at a five-

## MISS LETITIA'S PROFESSION

cent rate. Even though she never neglected *Hot Clues* she maintained a three-cent average during the new depression! The Doag and Hart people paid Rodney a hundred a week, to hold his sister.

Early in 1934 success proved embarrassing. A metropolitan newspaper, learning Miss Letitia's story, sent out a pert young woman and a freckled photographer. Details of the Long Island house, from Miss Letitia's curls to the Mallow silver's interlaced monogram, were blazoned in Sunday supplements. \*

It all seemed a little childish, in view of what the doctor said. The scales told Miss Letitia she was growing smaller; her mirror said, paler; more than ever as she grew weaker she seemed fragile, gentle, utterly out of congruity with the springs of the restored Mallow fortunes.

### III

Sitting in the twisted-wood seat under the Japanese maple Miss Letitia saw the big Lugano cabriolet of Mrs. Elmore Bacon glide to the porte-cochère of the white house. She liked Mrs. Bacon very much and she stepped a short way across the garden's bright bands. Her voice had always been low, slight; to call out loudly now would be one of those exertions the doctor forbade. The gray dress, though, was easily discernible against the patterned flowers, and Mrs. Bacon traversed the lawn to join her.

They chose a more comfortable seat, in the sun, and fell to talking of the forthcoming charity bazaar.

"I don't think people just ought to give money," Miss Letitia voiced opinion. "They ought to do something. I'm working some *petit point* table covers. They're old-fashioned, but they're rarely seen now and I hope some one will want to buy them."

"I'm sure they will," Mrs. Bacon approved. "You're wonderful, dear. So many activities. . . ." Her mind was busy with the Sunday supplement flare, but she couldn't devise a reasonable way to mention it to such a porcelain figurine.

For the better part of an hour they conned affairs social, reli-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

gious and charitable in that section of Long Island; then Miss Letitia, animated, walked with her visitor to the big Lugano, watched the blue magnificence roll away, mounted steps and entered her wide, old-type hall. She felt cheered but tired; it seemed a good idea to go upstairs and sleep awhile before dinner.

Foot on the second step, she paused. The big house seemed empty, lonely; she wished she were back in the Connecticut cottage. A positive weariness oppressed her.

Miss Letitia had been reared a good church member and her view of alcohol remained rigorous. Neither the concoctions of Prohibition nor the raw distillations of repeal had sullied her lips. But there was in the house—had been since its building—a residue of fine sherry, imported long ago by Miss Letitia's father.

A mental image bloomed of the pre-Revolutionary, cut-glass decanter, warmed by the brown glow of the wine. A small sip of that would be grateful: one could feel, it seemed, too fragile.

The little figure stepped down, as if the past curtsied to the Twentieth Century front door. Miss Letitia walked softly through an opening to her right and across the deep pile of the sitting-room rug. Thus she reached the folding-doors that she had had placed between there and the dining-room, to remind her of Connecticut.

The doors were partly open. Miss Letitia gasped.

A man who had been standing at the sideboard, stowing the Mallow silver silently in two suit-cases, whirled and drew from inside his coat an automatic pistol.

Miss Letitia was startled—out of reality, not into it. The stranger seemed the figment of a familiar dream. She had described him so often: black, partless hair that lay back as if glued; lithe, quick hands; skin a muddy olive; cruel mouth; rattiness gleaming in hot eyes.

A sentence in Miss Letitia's last true story came naturally to mind: "Joe's automatic seemed to leap from nowhere into



## MISS LETITIA'S PROFESSION

his hand." Even the name coincided, but the author did not know that.

"Not a sound!" the man ordered, but the rattiness faded, the cruel look softened, as he looked at Miss Letitia. The late afternoon light, lemon pale, more like sunrise than evening, slanted through the dining-room windows. The soft hues of the gray dress and the silvery curls gave a pastel effect, but the small face, very white, more nearly resembled an old cameo.

"Drop that rod, gimmick!" Miss Letitia said. "If you gat me you'll fry in the hot seat."

Gentleman Joe's mouth opened to a round "O"; his nostrils trembled; over his eyes flashed the look of a man convinced of hallucination.

He did exactly what Miss Letitia had told him to; the automatic fell from a nerveless hand.

Miss Letitia picked it up. She regarded it curiously, the first she had ever seen. But how many times she had described it: blunt, stub, blue, ugly.

"Don't hand me any tough luck patter," she warned. "You can't beat this rap."

"G-gawd!" stammered Gentleman Joe. "One of us is nuts."

"Don't crack wise." The gentle voice held its even modulation. "You're no big shot. You've probably been sniffing joy-powder to hop you up for this haul. You're a—an ump-chay!"

Gentleman Joe could stand no more. The gun had become the least of the terrors confronting him. He stared a last moment, incredulous. With a strangled cry he ran headlong across the room, plunged through a French window and sped across the lawn, trampling flowers, as if all the fiends clattered behind him.

Miss Letitia, grieved for the flowers, stood a long minute holding one hand over her heart, which hurt.

She had forgotten about the sherry. She placed the automatic gingerly on the sideboard. Then she returned to the sitting-room, wavering a trifle, and there pressed a button, bringing rose-glow to electric coals. She lowered herself into a com-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

fortable chair before the fire-place and picked up a small hoop, drum-tight with embroidery. Unconsciously her fingers began to work but the needle and thread shook.

Presently she looked up, face white, wistful.

"He took it on the lam," Miss Letitia sighed. "No guts."

# A Telephone Call\*

DOROTHY PARKER

*Dorothy Parker is a darling of the modernists for her wit, her irony, her power to satirize the foibles of human nature. In both prose and verse she dips her pen into fire and acid to expose the shams and the weaknesses of mortals. Her sophisticated satires appear frequently in The New Yorker and other magazines. The chief complaint of her large public is that she writes too little. Reprinted here is not one of her typical satires, but a simpler story in an unusual form, practically a prayer. One must read closely to find the story, which is told by implication rather than by the conventional outline. It first appeared in The Bookman.*

PLEASE, God, let him telephone me now. Dear God, let him call me now. I won't ask anything else of You, truly I won't. It isn't very much to ask. It would be so little to You, God, such a little, little thing. Only let him telephone now. Please, God. Please, please, please.

If I didn't think about it, maybe the telephone might ring. Sometimes it does that. If I could think of something else. If I could think of something else. Maybe if I counted five hundred by fives, it might ring by that time. I'll count slowly. I won't cheat. And if it rings when I get to three hundred, I won't stop; I won't answer it until I get to five hundred. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty. . . . Oh, please ring. *Please.*

This is the last time I'll look at the clock. I will not look at

\*From *Laments for the Living*, by Dorothy Parker. Copyright 1930. Published by The Viking Press, Inc., New York. Reprinted by permission of The Viking Press, Inc.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

it again. It's ten minutes past seven. He said he would telephone at five o'clock. "I'll call you at five, darling." I think that's where he said "darling." I'm almost sure he said it there. I know he called me "darling" twice, and the other time was when he said good-bye. "Good-bye, darling." He was busy, and he can't say much in the office, but he called me "darling" twice. He couldn't have minded my calling him up. I know you shouldn't keep telephoning them—I know they don't like that. When you do that, they know you are thinking about them and wanting them, and that makes them hate you. But I hadn't talked to him in three days—not in three days. And all I did was ask him how he was; it was just the way anybody might have called him up. He couldn't have minded that. He couldn't have thought I was bothering him. "No, of course you're not," he said. And he said he'd telephone me. He didn't have to say that. I didn't ask him to, truly I didn't. I'm sure I didn't. I don't think he would say he'd telephone me, and then just never do it. Please don't let him do that, God. Please don't.

"I'll call you at five, darling." "Good-bye, darling." He was busy, and he was in a hurry, and there were people around him, but he called me "darling" twice. That's mine, that's mine. I have that, even if I never see him again. Oh, but that's so little. That isn't enough. Nothing's enough, if I never see him again. Please let me see him again, God. Please, I want him so much. I want him so much. I'll be good, God. I will try to be better, I will, if You will let me see him again. If You will let him telephone me. Oh, let him telephone me now.

Ah, don't let my prayer seem too little to You, God. You sit up there, so white and old, with all the angels about You and the stars slipping by. And I come to You with a prayer about a telephone call. Ah, don't laugh, God. You see, You don't know how it feels. You're so safe, there on Your throne, with the blue swirling under You. Nothing can touch You; no one can twist Your heart in his hands. This is suffering, God, this is bad, bad suffering. Won't You help me? For Your Son's sake, help me. You said You would do whatever was asked of You in His

## A TELEPHONE CALL

name. Oh, God, in the name of Thine only beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, let him telephone me now.

I must stop this. I mustn't be this way. Look. Suppose a young man says he'll call a girl up, and then something happens, and he doesn't. That isn't so terrible, is it? Why, it's going on all over the world, right this minute. Oh, what do I care what's going on all over the world? Why can't that telephone ring? Why can't it, why can't it? Couldn't you ring? Ah, please, couldn't, you? You damned, ugly, shiny thing. It would hurt you to ring, wouldn't it? Oh, that would hurt you. Damn you, I'll pull your filthy roots out of the wall, I'll smash your smug black face in little bits. Damn you to hell.

No, no, no. I must stop. I must think about something else. This is what I'll do. I'll put the clock in the other room. Then I can't look at it. If I do have to look at it, then I'll have to walk into the bedroom, and that will be something to do. Maybe, before I look at it again, he will call me. I'll be so sweet to him, if he calls me. If he says he can't see me to-night, I'll say, "Why, that's all right, dear. Why, of course it's all right." I'll be the way I was when I first met him. Then maybe he'll like me again. I was always sweet, at first. Oh, it's so easy to be sweet to people before you love them.

I think he must still like me a little. He couldn't have called me "darling" twice to-day, if he didn't still like me a little. It isn't all gone, if he still likes me a little; even if it's only a little, little bit. You see, God, if You would just let him telephone me, I wouldn't have to ask You anything more. I would be sweet to him, I would be gay, I would be just the way I used to be, and then he would love me again. And then I would never have to ask You for anything more. Don't You see, God? So won't You please let him telephone me? Won't You please, please, please?

Are You punishing me, God, because I've been bad? Are You angry with me because I did that? Oh, but, God, there are so many bad people—You could not be hard only to me. And it wasn't very bad; it couldn't have been bad. We didn't hurt

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

anybody, God. Things are only bad when they hurt people. We didn't hurt one single soul; You know that. You know it wasn't bad, don't You, God? So won't You let him telephone me now?

If he doesn't telephone me, I'll know God is angry with me. I'll count five hundred by fives, and if he hasn't called me then, I will know God isn't going to help me, ever again. That will be the sign. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five. . . . It was bad. I knew it was bad. All right, God, send me to hell. You think You're frightening me with Your hell, don't You? You think Your hell is worse than mine.

I mustn't. I mustn't do this. Suppose he's a little late calling me up—that's nothing to get hysterical about. Maybe he isn't going to call—maybe he's coming straight up here without telephoning. He'll be cross if he sees I have been crying. They don't like you to cry. He doesn't cry. I wish to God I could make him cry. I wish I could make him cry and tread the floor and feel his heart heavy and big and festering in him. I wish I could hurt him like hell.

He doesn't wish that about me. I don't think he even knows how he makes me feel. I wish he could know, without my telling him. They don't like you to tell them they've made you cry. They don't like you to tell them you're unhappy because of them. If you do, they think you're possessive and exacting. And then they hate you. They hate you whenever you say anything you really think. You always have to keep playing little games. Oh, I thought we didn't have to; I thought this was so big I could say whatever I meant. I guess you can't, ever. I guess there isn't ever anything big enough for that. Oh, if he would just telephone, I wouldn't tell him I had been sad about him. They hate sad people. I would be so sweet and so gay, he couldn't help but like me. If he would only telephone. If he would only telephone.

Maybe that's what he is doing. Maybe he is coming up here without calling me up. Maybe he's on his way now. Something

## A TELEPHONE CALL

might have happened to him. No, nothing could ever happen to him. I can't picture anything happening to him. I never picture him run over. I never see him lying still and long and dead. I wish he were dead. That's a terrible wish. That's a lovely wish. If he were dead, he would be mine. If he were dead, I would never think of now and the last few weeks. I would remember only the lovely times. It would be all beautiful. I wish he were dead. I wish he were dead, dead, dead.

This is silly. It's silly to go wishing people were dead just because they don't call you up the very minute they said they would. Maybe the clock's fast; I don't know whether it's right. Maybe he's hardly late at all. Anything could have made him a little late. Maybe he had to stay at his office. Maybe he went home, to call me up from there, and somebody came in. He doesn't like to telephone me in front of people. Maybe he's worried, just a little, little bit, about keeping me waiting. He might even hope that I would call him up. I could do that. I could telephone him.

I mustn't. I mustn't. I mustn't. Oh, God, please don't let me telephone him. Please keep me from doing that. I know, God, just as well as You do, that if he were worried about me, he'd telephone no matter where he was or how many people there were around him. Please make me know that, God. I don't ask You to make it easy for me—You can't do that, for all that You could make a world. Only let me know it, God. Don't let me go on hoping. Don't let me say comforting things to myself. Please don't let me hope, dear God. Please don't.

I won't telephone him. I'll never telephone him again as long as I live. He'll rot in hell, before I'll call him up. You don't have to give me strength, God; I have it myself. If he wanted me, he could get me. He knows where I am. He knows I'm waiting here. He's so sure of me, so sure. I wonder why they hate you, as soon as they are sure of you. I should think it would be so sweet to be sure.

It would be so easy to telephone him. Then I'd know. Maybe it wouldn't be a foolish thing to do. Maybe he wouldn't mind.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Maybe he'd like it. Maybe he has been trying to get me. Sometimes people try and try to get you on the telephone, and they say the number doesn't answer. I'm not just saying that to help myself; that really happens. You know that really happens, God. Oh, God, keep me away from that telephone. Keep me away. Let me still have just a little bit of pride. I think I'm going to need it, God. I think it will be all I'll have.

Oh, what does pride matter, when I can't stand it if I don't talk to him? Pride like that is such a silly, shabby little thing. The real pride, the big pride, is in having no pride. I'm not saying that just because I want to call him. I am not. That's true, I know that's true. I will be big. I will be beyond little prides.

Please, God, keep me from telephoning him. Please, God.

I don't see what pride has to do with it. This is such a little thing, for me to be bringing in pride, for me to be making such a fuss about. I may have misunderstood him. Maybe he said for me to call him up, at five. "Call me at five, darling." He could have said that, perfectly well. It's so possible that I didn't hear him right. "Call me at five, darling." I'm almost sure that's what he said. God, don't let me talk this way to myself. Make me know, please make me know.

I'll think about something else. I'll just sit quietly. If I could sit still. If I could sit still. Maybe I could read. Oh, all the books are about people who love each other, truly and sweetly. What do they want to write about that for? Don't they know it isn't true? Don't they know it's a lie, it's a God damned lie? What do they have to tell about that for, when they know how it hurts? Damn them, damn them, damn them.

I won't. I'll be quiet. This is nothing to get excited about. Look. Suppose he were some one I didn't know very well. Suppose he were another girl. Then I'd just telephone and say, "Well, for goodness' sake, what happened to you?" That's what I'd do, and I'd never even think about it. Why can't I be casual and natural, just because I love him? I can be. Honestly, I can be. I'll call him up, and be so easy and pleasant. You see if I won't, God. Oh, don't let me call him. Don't, don't, don't.



## A TELEPHONE CALL

God, aren't You really going to let him call me? Are You sure, God? Couldn't You please relent? Couldn't You? I don't even ask You to let him telephone me now, God; only let him do it in a little while. I'll count five hundred by fives. I'll do it so slowly and so fairly. If he hasn't telephoned then, I'll call him. I will. Oh, please, dear God, dear kind God, my blessed Father in Heaven, let him call before then. Please, God. Please.

Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five. . . .

## Charity\*

WORTH TUTTLE

*Worth Tuttle (Mrs. W. P. Hedder) is a graduate of Trinity College, North Carolina. She has done Red Cross settlement work in New York City, has taught in a Negro college in New Orleans in order to study the Negro, and has been assistant to W. B. Pitkin, who turns out best-sellers with such amazing facility. Her stories have appeared in The Atlantic Monthly, Copy, the Columbia University anthology, and various publications. One story, The Tree and the Forest, was awarded a prize in the New Pearson's Magazine contest.*

CHARITY was sweeping the sidewalk before the Wooten home when Mrs. Wooten called to her from the front door: "I want you to run over to Miss Virginia's with a plate of syllabub, and ask her if we can have some eggs—tell her you will gather them if Aunt Jenny's busy. Go through the back way and hurry. Saturday morning work is piling up on us. Here, I'll take the broom."

"Yas'm." Charity gave the broom to Mrs. Wooten.

Out on the sidewalk beneath the avenue of oaks, she looked down critically at her white apron, ran her fingers deftly over her braided hair, which tonight would be released into a mass of springy kinks. There was just a chance that she would meet Jim before she reached the corner. He usually drove Warren and Company's dray up Gillespie Street about this time on Saturday. It was a pity she had to go the back way. If she could walk down Gillespie, she would surely meet him at the corner of Main.

\*From *New Pearson's Magazine*. Reprinted in *Copy*. Reprinted here by permission of the author.

## CHARITY

"Whar' you gwin, Cha'ity?" Molly Newbern's fat voice called. "Howcum you in sech a rush? My missus took herself off to a ca-rd party. I ain't in no hurry. Say, gal, what' you gwin weah dis night?"

Molly had sauntered to the gate between precisely clipped hedges and leaning on her broom, invited a confab. Charity slowed her steps the minimum politeness required and spoke over her shoulder:

"What I always wears, ma pink mull."

"Better stop savin' money fo' a house you ain't gwin' get an' spen' some o' hit fo' some glad rags. Don't, Jim's gwin' git another lady. Ain't I seen him no mo' den two nights ago chattin' heself hoarse to a black gal?"

Charity's steps lagged, stopped.

"Yas'm, I sho' did. I seen yo' Jim a-chattin' heself hoarse on de corner down to wads Shaw's, an' I says to Lettuce, 'Lettuce, ain't dat Cha'ity's Jim standin' down dere?' She say, 'Ain't it?' An' I say, 'An' dat ain't Cha'ity he's going on so wid!' An' she say, 'No, it ain't.' An' it wan't. Dat was a *black-skinned* gal!"

Charity nodded, her relief plain, "Dat was nobody but Sudie Randolph from over to Greenvul. Jim was her man—before he become acquainted wid me." She quickened her steps again.

"Dat's all right, honey," Molly waved her broom airily, "I ain't tryin' to scandalize you 'bout yo' man—eff'n I was, I'd tell yo' somethung! Lawd, I knowed Jim long fo' you did—befo' he *re-formed*. But he's yo' man now, sho' an' simple. I's only givin' you a wise 'oman's ad-vice: eff'n you wants to keep him fo' yo's, git some gay clothes an' stop de talk 'bout ownin' a house! You know white folks ain't gwin' sell you dat Tu'nuh place right heah in dey own neighborhood! Not even eff'n Jedge Wootun heself was to ask dem to! Stop yo' dreamin', gal, an' get some glad rags. Dat's what a man wants—eff'n he's a man like Jim. Lawd, don't I know!"

Charity, with a backward wave of her hand, went on. That kind of talk didn't bother her. Molly was talking about the common ordinary nigger. She didn't know Jim no matter what

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

she said. Glad rags to keep Jim! Charity laughed. Last night Jim had told her she was the Rose of Wilsonville, said he'd rather look at her in that pink mull and ribbons than at any vaudeville lady he had ever seen! And he had seen many vaudeville ladies—in the days before he had known her.

Still—the disappointment Charity felt when she turned into the side-street without having caught a glimpse of Jim was keener than it would have been if she had not passed Molly. Certainly she would see him after dinner, but she wanted to see him this minute. Even a malicious hint of infidelity on his part was something she wanted to forget as soon as possible, and the quickest oblivion lay in the sight of his good-natured, affectionate face.

That talk with Molly had brought home to her again a fact she often wished she could forget. She was not like other girls. They told her that often in such conversations as she had had with Molly. She realized it herself without being able to explain the difference. For one thing, she didn't like to talk about Jim to them—and if you didn't talk to them about your man and your clothes, what was there to talk about? Maybe her extra years of schooling—she had gone through the fifth grade—made the difference. She didn't know. Outwardly she lived the same life: seven in the morning until eight in the evening in the kitchen of a Wilsonville white citizen—unless she went to pick cotton or hoe tobacco; from eight to eleven in the evening at the dance hall of the Colored Association for Mutual Benefit and Pleasure, or at church, or sitting around Sifaw's; asleep from eleven to six in a crowded cabin.

The difference, she decided, was inside herself. She would not always live the life she lived now. She had worked hard and she had saved money. She was going to have some of the things white folks had.

One of those things was a three-roomed house at the end of Gillespie Street, the Old Turner Place. It was Wilsonville's oldest house, but it was still good. In its setting of red ramblers and

## CHARITY

hollyhocks and sweet shrub that defied the hard dirt of the yard, it was a home worth saving for and dreaming about.

Charity's desire to be the owner of that house and the wife of Jim had come to her at the same time. She had never fooled around with men. Until she had known Jim she had hardly thought of marriage except as something which might—some day—put some meaning into the life she lived.

For months now, as she peeled potatoes or shucked corn or dressed chickens over Mrs. Judge Wooten's sink, she furnished and refurnished her home. She moved the easel from the corner nearest the door to the corner opposite the window, so that the best light would fall on the enlarged photograph of Jim and herself in their wedding clothes. The gilt frame for that picture was now in the show window of Aires & Son—but she would get it in time! She smoothed the heavy white counterpane and the red embroidered pillowshams on the brass bed in the parlor. She draped the felt mantel cover with brass tacks, and set in the exact center the *immortelles* Mrs. Wooten had given her when she cleaned the attic. Oh, it would be home and she would stay in it! Jim had promised her that. If a man owned a house, he could support his wife. Maybe she'd take in a little nice washing—Miss Lillian's summer dresses and such as that. . . .

She retraced her steps to the side gate of the Starling home, and went over the smooth grass to the kitchen. She pulled at the screen door and Aunt Jenny's black sweaty face peeped around the pantry door.

"Lawd, Cha'ity, is dat you? Come in, gal, come in. I's got boff hans in de dough fo' de dinnuh biscuits, else I'd git you a cha'."

"Ain't got no time to stop, Miss Jenny. Miss Wooten sent me fo' some aigs. Is you got some we-all can have?"

"You'll have to go axe Miss Virginy fo' de chicken house key. I ain't had no time to gather 'um—Miss Virginy's laid up ag'in—go right on up de staihs and git hit. You can gather aigs 's good as I can."

Charity was at the door when Aunt Jenny began again: "Lawd,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

you needn't be in sech a push! Stop when you comes back and tell me 'bout yo'self. I heerd some talk the other day 'bout how high-tone and stuck-up you gettin' to be, since you got money in de bank. I wouldn't lis'n to none o' hit. 'Cha'ity ain't no triffin' gal,' I says, 'she don't take no stock in gassin', dat's all. She mought be a fool,' I say, 'thinkun she an' dat Jim can own a place, but she ain't triffin'!' " Aunt Jenny laughed a rollicking laugh that implied good-nature behind her skepticism, "T's lived gwin' on seventy yeahs an' I ain't seen no colored pusson own a house, say nothun' ownin' one neah whar white folks lives—"

Charity looked back from the door, "I won't have no time to stop dis mawnin', Miss Jenny. Miss Wooten tol' me to hurry right back."

Aunt Jenny grunted, "Bettuh stop, honey, else I'll believe all what I heahs."

Charity went on as though she hadn't heard. She went up the wide stairs of the Starling mansion, the show place of Wilsonville, and knocked at a dark-paneled door on the second floor.

"Mawnin', Miss Virginy."

"Why, good morning, Charity. How is Mrs. Wooten this morning? She didn't come over yesterday. Does she think that's the way to treat her only sister?"

"No'm, she don't think dat, she been mighty busy during cou'n week. Jedge bringing home a couple lawyers every meal. She say tell you she'll be over today or after church tomorrer. She sent me over to see eff'n you could let us-all have some aigs—many's as you can spare. Miss Jenny say for me to get de key and gather 'um. . . ."

"Why, yes, Charity—there should be nearly two dozen in the hen house. You'll have to get the key from the drawer in my desk in the library—the little drawer in the right-hand side I *think*." She put a frail hand to her head, "I can't seem to remember much of anything lately. . . ."

"Yas'm, sickness sho' do use up a pusson." Charity backed to the door.

## CHARITY

"If it isn't in that drawer, Charity, look in Mr. Starling's desk, but I *think*—"

"Dat's all right, Miss Virginy, I'll fin' it somewhars. Good-mawnin', Miss Virginy."

To avoid the waiting conversation with Aunt Jenny in the kitchen, Charity took the key from the little drawer in the right-hand side of the desk and went through the conservatory and out the side door to the chicken yard. She took fifteen eggs from the nest, put them carefully into the capacious pockets of her apron, slipped back through the conservatory, and replaced the key in the little drawer.

"Don't make no diffurence what folks says 'bout me not bein' sociable," she soliloquized on her homeward way. "No make no diffurence *now*. When I gets ma house all fixed, I'll giv 'um a housewarmin' dat will make 'um change dey tune. Now, de Lawd knows, I got trouble 'nough gettin' dat house!"

As she closed the ice-box door at half-past three on a chicken dressed for Sunday dinner, the telephone rang. She recognized Mrs. Starling's voice and called Mrs. Wooten from her siesta to talk to her. Then she went to the kitchen closet, took a lilac-bedecked hat from a nail—it had been a gift from Lillian Wooten when she had left the day before for a series of summer visits—and put it on. She took fifty cents from her week's wages in her stocking, looked at herself appraisingly in the cracked mirror, "shooed" the last protesting fly from the clean kitchen, and went out the back door.

As she walked along the drive, Mrs. Wooten called to her from the living-room window.

"Yas'm," Charity tried to keep the impatience out of her voice as she turned back. It might mean an extra chicken to dress and that meant delay, or complete ruin, of her rendezvous with Jim.

"No—that's all right. You needn't come back."

Charity turned again toward the street.

"Wait a minute, Charity. Where're you going?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Jes' down de street apiece. I'll be back plenty time to start suppah."

"Very well." Mrs. Wooten dropped the curtain behind which she had concealed her incomplete toilette, and disappeared.

Charity was too intent upon her tryst with Jim to wonder why Mrs. Wooten had seemed doubtful about her regular time off. She turned the corner that separated "Scratch Ankle" from the white town of Wilsonville, and saw Jim's dray a block away. She hurried as fast as she could without seeming to hurry so that she could meet him in front of "Shaw's."

Jim saw her and left a group of young bucks he described to Charity as lazy loafers he didn't care to have her acquainted with, and greeted her with enthusiasm, "How is you, gal?" He slapped at her affectionately with a heavy hand, "Got de biggest saucer o' strawberry *ice-cream* fo' you in heah you ever set dem sparks o' yo's on!"

Over the brilliant pink of that ice cream, Charity began her homesteading monologue. . . . With a sudden sinking of her heart she realized that she had begun to do all the talking just lately, just about the time Sudie Randolph had come to Wilsonville. She finished her ice cream and watched Jim devour his second plateful in great smacking gulps. Why did she love him as she did? He didn't *look* different from all the other men in Scratch Ankle. But her love for him went far below the surface into his boundless good-nature and affection for her, his protectiveness, his present steady going after what had been a notoriously wild life. Sometimes she had wondered whether her love had been provoked by his readiness to help her save for a place and his reluctant consent to marry her regular in the church when they had it. No, that was all wrong. He had agreed to regularity and thrift because he wanted those things, too. It was just luck that they had found each other.

"Jim," she asked, and bit her tongue in disgust at herself as she did it, "has you been foolin' 'roun with Miss Randolph much dese days?"

He laughed his wide-mouthed guffaw, "Lawd, honey, howcum



## CHARITY

you axe me dat? Lawd, eff'n you ain't de funniest little brown gal—Lawd, you do tickle me!" When he had laughed until he had Charity laughing with him, he stopped suddenly and leaned toward her, "Come on now, you funny little brown gal, an' tell me, when is you gwine marry me?"

"When we gets our house, man. Ain't I tol' you?" She smiled tolerantly upon him. She was at peace again.

"Aw, come on, we can't wait fo' dat. I's jes' dis minute come from Mistuh Allen Edwards' office, an' I showed him our savin' bank book, but he say'd dey wuz white folks lookin' at dat place an'—"

"Umg," Charity disdained, "ain't no white folks gwin' live dere, widout dey po' white trash."

"I ast Mistuh Allen Edwards eff'n we brought in all de cash at onct could we have de place an' he say'd, 'Show me yo' cash an' den I'll tell you.' Dey ain't gwin' let us have dat place, honey. You and me may jes' as well get usselves bedded down ober to yo' ma's—"

Charity leaned toward him, put her strong, slim brown hand on his, "Tonight I's gwin' ast Jedge Wooten to help us out. Eff'n he'll speak a wud to Mistuh Allen Edwards, hit'll be all right. Jedge Wooten is de bes' white man in dis town an' he'll be mighty glad to know we've been savin'. Member all de talks he made to colored folks 'bout savin'?"

Jim shook his big head doubtfully, but when Charity left him a little later, he seemed as eager as ever to follow her in her ambition. How slow-minded she had been to have worried over Molly's talk! Jim was only being polite to Miss Randolph because she was an old acquaintance. She meant no more to him than all the others he had discarded when he had joined the Baptist Church. It was only two weeks ago that he had been made a deacon. No, nothing could make her doubt him. If she ever could then there would be nothing left for her—her life was Jim and their future as respectable citizens of Wilsonville.

"S'long, Gal." He leaned far out of his seat to help her get

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

over the wheel of his dray at the corner of Gillespie Street, "lis'n fo' me long 'bout ha'f past eight sharp."

There was only a selfish motive behind Charity's rush with an unusually appetizing supper. The sooner the Judge had eaten her biscuits, the sooner she could approach him on the subject uppermost in her mind. What news she might have for Jim when his whistle announced his arrival at the kitchen door! One word from the Judge to Mr. Allen Edwards and the house would be theirs. They could pay what they had now and the rest on credit. She could get ready to marry in two weeks—

She put the supper on the table, tinkled the little silver bell softly and hurried back to the kitchen mirror to release her braids into a bushy, black cushion.

The silver bell jangled sharply. What could she have forgotten? She put down the pink ribbon she had begun to weave into the cushion and hurried to the dining-room. Maybe she could speak to the Judge now—

The silence that greeted her at first made no impression. Sometimes with Miss Lillian away there was little talk at the table. She saw nothing amiss with the service and waited for Mrs. Wooten to speak.

But it was the Judge who said, "Charity." He turned half way in his chair to look at her.

"Yassuh." There was surprise in her voice.

He continued to look at her as though he had not seen her there in the dining room three times a day for more than a year.

"Charity—"

"Yassuh." There was more than surprise in her voice now. There was a dread of impending woe. She had felt it once before.

"Did you know that Mrs. Starling had lost fifty dollars?"

"Nosuh." There was relief now, and a polite interest.

The Judge looked at her in his most judicial manner. He didn't speak for a full half-minute. She looked at him, wondering.

## CHARITY

Mrs. Wooten began to fidget with her knife and fork, but she said nothing.

Suddenly the Judge turned around completely in his chair and gave Charity the look he saved for use in the second degree. Her fingers found the ends of her apron strings and while she looked back at the Judge with eyes in which hope and fear were struggling, she twisted and untwisted the ends of white cotton. A lump rose in her throat. She swallowed with difficulty. Was she to be accused a second time for a theft she had not committed?

"Charity—" The Judge's voice was not unkind. It was firm, a voice designed to help truth out. "Mrs. Starling telephoned Mrs. Wooten this afternoon that fifty dollars had mysteriously disappeared from a drawer in her desk—the very drawer from which she told you to take the chicken house key this morning. Now as you were the only person who had access to that drawer—"

"I ain't stole no fifty dolluhs, Jedge." Her mouth drooped.

"I have not finished speaking, Charity."

She shifted her weight to the other foot. The belt of her apron was a string now, but she looked at the Judge steadily.

He cleared his throat. The fingers of his left hand began to play with his goatee, and the fingers of the right to tap the table. Soon he would be completely clothed in his court-room manner. Mrs. Wooten was still determined to find the oddest possible arrangement for her knife and fork.

"We are not *accusing* you, Charity. I am merely stating facts. Mrs. Wooten and I went over to see Mrs. Starling after she telephoned her loss. We have been over the ground as thoroughly as we can go, without your help. We have this much evidence—circumstantial, of course—against you. Aunt Jenny says you acted—well, a little queer, when you left the house. You didn't go back through the kitchen—"

"No, Jedge, I didn't—'cause Miss Wooten tol' me to hurry right back an' I knowed eff'n I got in dere wid Miss Jenny I wouldn't get away 'fo' sundown."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Is that right, Martha? Did you caution Charity about staying?"

Mrs. Wooten nodded, with an intake of the breath, "Aunt Jenny's a great talker.

"Well—that's as it may be, Charity. We'd like to take your word for it . . . but to continue the presentment of the case: An hour after you left Mrs. Starling remembered the money—it was from rents she had collected in Scratch Ankle the day before yesterday—and sent Aunt Jenny downstairs for it. It was not there." The Judge paused. "You were the only person—"

"I didn't take no money, Jedge. I swears I didn't!" Charity's voice held that limitless woe for which the Negro voice alone has capacity.

"Charity, it is a solemn thing to swear, a very solemn thing. Do you realize that you *are* swearing and to me, a representative of the court, of the law of the State of North Carolina, that you—did-not-take—fifty—dollars—in-five-and-ten-dollar bills from-a-drawer-in-the-desk—in Mrs. Pickney Starling's library?" He tapped the table at every word and his gray eyes behind his glittering spectacles bored into Charity's.

Charity swallowed, but she looked straight back at him: "Yassuh, I knows I's a-swearin', an' I's a-swearin' de Lawd's truth. Fo' Gawd, I ain't seen no fifty dolluhs."

"You didn't even *see* a roll of bills in that drawer when you took the chicken house key?"

"Nosuh, I ain't."

The Judge cleared his throat, "All right. We'll let that go for the present. Now, for another matter—another phase of the same matter, to be exact. We also learned this afternoon that you are intending to—marry Mr. Bob Warren's drayman, Jim. Is that true?"

"Yassuh, *dat's* true—soon's we can. Dat's something I was aimin' to ask you 'bout—I means—"

"Wait, not now. We'll fix you up for that, of course. But we heard also that you and that Jim are trying to raise money to buy the old Turner Place. Is that correct?"

## CHARITY

"Yassuh, we wants to. That's what—"

"All right. Now what could be more likely than that you and that Jim need just a little more—"

"We needs two hundred and fifty mo' dolluhs, an' Mistuh Edwards—"

"Do you mean to tell me that you and that nigger Jim, the most worthless—"

"He ain't w'uthless no mo', now. He saved mo' den half o' dat five hundred!"

"Yes, I hear he's—improved. But do you mean to tell me that together you have five hundred dollars?"

"Yassuh." Momentary pride relit Charity's face. "I wu'ked in tobacco whole season las' yeah an' de yeah befo'—"

"Well, if it's honest, I am glad to hear of it. But to come back to the point immediately before us. Mrs. Wooten and I made another little visit in connection with this loss of Mrs. Starling's. Mrs. Starling, in going back over your record, learned that while you were employed by Mrs. John McNeill—"

Charity started. Not at Mrs. McNeill's name—she had known that would be brought up—but at Jim's whistle at the back door. Her sudden movement was duly observed by the Judge. He glanced at his wife. Mrs. Wooten transferred her attention from her silver to the crumbs near her plate.

"Hadn't you better sit down, Charity?" The Judge's voice was colder.

"I'm a-waitin' to go to de sociable at de chu'ch, Jedge, eff'n—"

"Better forget that for the present. We must straighten out this matter of the fifty dollars now."

"Lemme go an' tell Jim—he's at de back do' now."

"Stay here, Charity," Mrs. Wooten took her first active part in the investigation. "I'll tell him I can't let you off tonight."

"Can't I see him jes' a minute?" Terrified tears filled Charity's eyes.

Mrs. Wooten looked at the Judge. He shook his head. She went toward the kitchen.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Oh, Martha—tell him to wait outside. I'll want to talk to him, too."

Charity heard the screen door open, strained her ears to hear Jim's voice.

"Better take a chair there by the wall, Charity."

Listlessly she reached for one and sank into it. How could it be that her pink mull, freshly laundered and fluffy, hung now on the pantry door, and that her hair—? As if trying to prove that it could not be true that one so happy twenty minutes ago could be so miserable now she ran her fingers over her head. It *was* a mass of woolly softness. Twenty minutes ago she *had* been happy.

The Judge, looking intently at the back of his long hand, cleared his throat again.

Mrs. Wooten came in and sat down at her place.

The Judge looked at Charity. "Mrs. Wooten and I have talked with Mrs. McNeill, Charity, and she told us that while you were employed by her, a valuable ring disappeared under very suspicious circumstances—"

"I didn't steal no ring off Miss McNeill, Jedge. I tol' her—"

"Just a minute, Charity. Mrs. McNeill said that she went away for a week, leaving her house in your care. There was nobody else there but a white girl the Missionary Society had recommended for sewing. When Mrs. McNeill came back, the ring was gone. She asked you about it—"

"I ain't never seen no ring Miss McNeill lef', Jedge, an'—"

"Then why did you leave her at the end of the week for no apparent reason, after she had told you she would not discharge you?"

Charity looked at him blankly, said simply: "I don't wu'k for folks who accuse me wrong."

The Wootens exchanged deprecating glances. The Judge looked at his watch.

"Charity," he spoke sharply now, "don't let your feelings get the better of you now. If you did not steal this money, you will not be punished. You are a good cook and we should hate to

## CHARITY

lose you. *If you have the money, give it back now. Mrs. Starling will not have you prosecuted.*"

Charity looked at him helplessly. He began again:

"If you do not confess and give it up, Charity, it will be a case for the court. The evidence is all against you: except for Aunt Jenny, who has lived in the Starling family for thirty years, you were the only person in the library after the money was put there. We know that you were *suspected* of theft once before. We know that you are particularly interested in money right now. . . . Think it over, Charity . . . Martha, will you ask Jim to come in?"

At the sight of Jim in his mustard-colored suit, his plaid tie and his boutonniere of honeysuckle, Charity sobbed aloud. He must have misunderstood the invitation to come into the dining room, for when he heard Charity's sob, his smiling and festive expression changed to one of mystification. He stood shuffling his heavy feet and passing his new straw hat from one hand to the other.

In a few concise sentences the Judge explained the situation to him. Then he subjected him to an inclusive cross-examination as to Charity's character, his own past, his future hopes, and the source of the savings for the house. Though famous as a conversationalist among his own people, Jim was now, as always, struck dumb among his superiors. He answered the Judge in "yassuhs" and "nosuhs" and the Judge summed up his replies in rigid statements. At first Jim tried to explain what he had said, or meant to have said, but his vocabulary had no chance against the Judge's legal rhetoric, so he gave up the attempt. He stood awkwardly between the door and the table, sucking his tongue perplexedly, as if trying to decide whether he had testified for or against Charity. Charity, sitting with her head bowed against the back of the chair, could give him no assurance.

"Martha." The Judge finally turned to his wife as to a jury, "you have heard the case as I have put it—or as Charity and Jim have put it. What is your opinion?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Why—er—I hardly know," Mrs. Wooten faltered. "It *does* look like Charity's guilty, but she's been such a good girl in every way—"

"I wanted your impartial judgment, my dear, not an emotional indecision."

In the silence that followed, Charity's labored breathing was loud. Jim made an effort to cross the room to her, but the difficulties in getting his big frame between the buffet and Judge Wooten's chair were too much for him. After his second indecisive movement, the Judge looked furtively at his wife. Did these darkies really love each other, or did a mutual sin draw them together?

"Charity," the Judge rose from the table and replaced his chair with exactitude, "we will give you tonight to think it over. You will sleep here. If, in the morning, you have decided to confess and return the money, we will see what we can do toward giving you another chance. If you decide against my advice and your own good sense to keep silent, it will be a case for the court. I am sorry it has happened—very sorry. Not only because, as Mrs. Wooten says, you have been a good girl while you've been with us, but because I hope to see the Southern Negro progress, and every instance like this puts that future further away. . . . Jim, you may go."

"Yassuh—kin I speak a wu'd to Cha'ity?"

"No, I think it best you don't. Come around in the morning and see what she has decided to do."

The July sun, burning hot, poured in through the iron-grated windows of the Wilson County Jail. It made a checker-board of heat on the bent shoulders and bowed head of Charity Roberts. She didn't feel it. She didn't feel anything but a dull, consuming misery. At first she had tried to spell out comfort from the Testament her pastor from the Baptist Church had brought her, but she gave it up. What solace was there in it for her?

For three weeks she had lived in this cell. Her case had been moved up to the next term of court, now a week off, but she



## CHARITY

cared little about it now. Since Sunday she had cared for nothing—but a visit from Jim. She had not been able to eat. She had slept only to have dreams in which she had followed him at a distance without ever being able to reach him.

The first two weeks had not been so bad. She had been horrified to find herself in jail, but the sight of Jim halting his dray outside at least once a day and persuading a trusty in the yard to hand a bottle of pop or a peach through her grating had kept her almost happy. She had continued to dream of the future. Jim had found a lawyer, and though it seemed that he would need most of her share of the savings to clear her, he thought he could do it. All in all, she could have lived through those weeks and come out of jail with nothing more than a deep resentment against white people.

And then one day Jim had come after a talk with the Judge and said things looked bad. Last Friday that was. The Judge said everything pointed to Charity as the thief, though no trace of the money had been found in her belongings. That day Jim had left the jail in low spirits. He had been back only once for a "hello." He hadn't sent her anything else.

On Sunday—visiting day—Molly had come, uncommissioned, to explain his absence:

"Better hurry an' git yo'self ouden dat place, honey. Jim carried dat black gal to de Big League Dance las' night. She sho' out for dat nigger—an' clo'es! She got 'um!"

From the depths of her misery Charity had answered, her voice seeming to come from a great distance, "Hit's as he sees hit, Molly. Eff'n he can—"

She had dropped down on the iron cot out of Molly's sight. Molly, after repeated calls, had opened pleasantries with the occupant of the cell above.

The two clocks in the court house tower across from the jail struck three. Charity lifted listless eyes and looked through the grating at the scorched grass and old ashes in the yard beneath her cell. Wearily she turned to the window that overlooked the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

street. It was hopeless, she knew, but if only she could see Jim, even at a distance! Jim in his overalls with that cap over one ear, coming to explain his absence!

"Cha'ity!"

Charity's heart bounded, then dropped to its level of misery. It was Molly again. She slipped out of sight.

"Hey, you black man up dere. Stomp on de flo' an' wake up dat gal Cha'ity what lives under you!"

Charity's neighbor stomped. Charity went to the window.

"Stop yo' racket now, she heah." Then, solemnly, Molly looked at Charity's window, "Lawd, gal, you free! Miss Wooten telephoned Miss Alston to tell me to come tell *you* dat de sheriff on he way to tu'n you loose—dey's found' dat money! Ain't dat somepun!"

Charity put her head down on the sill and for the first time since the night she had been accused, tears came.

"Lawd, gal, dis ain't no time to weep an' moan. YOU IS FREE! Ole Miss Sta'lin gave dat money to Miss Lillian to take on her trip—an' den clean forgot hit—she say tell you she so sorry, an' she hope you'll understan' how she can't seem to remember nothun' no mo'."

Molly stopped, waiting to be asked for more. Charity didn't lift her head. She didn't care about the money. She wanted news of Jim.

"An' Miss Wooten say you is to come right back an' cook fo' her—say dey ain't had nothun' fittun' to eat since you lef' . . . Lawd, chile, eff'n dat ain't de sheriff now comin' from de cou't house to let you loose!" Molly lifted a white-gloved hand with a great show of shadow lace at the wrist, and shaded her eyes. Plainly she wished to be questioned as to her glad rags on a weekday. She turned back to Charity when no questions came, "Hurry an' git ready to come outuh dere. I got anoder piece o' news mo' astonishin' den what I don' tol' you."

With an eagerness she did not know she still had, Charity made ready for the unexpected release. Maybe after all her worry Jim had been busy getting her cleared. Maybe Jim was

## CHARITY

waiting for her now over there at the court house. Happily she followed the sheriff out of the jail gate. She hardly noticed when Molly joined them, rustling her silken flounces most satisfactorily.

"Why ain't you axing where I's been in m' glad rags on a weekday?" She nudged Charity in the side. "You'd be mighty inter-rested eff'n you knowed!"

The rattle of a dilapidated Ford announced the approach of somebody from Scratch Ankle. Charity was seeing Jim greet her in the court house. She didn't raise her eyes until Molly's "I wishes you a long an' happy life" with an airy wave of her lacy arm brought her to attention.

From the rear seat white ribbons floated, and an old shoe, still dripping rice, dangled from the window.

Charity stumbled and grasped the sheriff's arm for support.

"Dat's yo' Jim what didn't care nothun' fo' glad rags. Done married dat Sudie Randolph. Don't say I didn't tell you!" Molly waved again.

The bride, from behind a bouquet of giant snowballs, bowed a response, and the Scratch Ankle cab went around the corner.

"Dat's why I's so dolled up, honey. I was invited to set in de bride's pew, mongst de friens an' relatives o' de 'tractin' parties. Dey gone on de honeymoon now—to Greenvul an' *all* 'roun! Jim sho' am flushed on dat money he save fo' a house! Lawd, honey, bettuh git busy now an' fin' yo'self anoder man to help yo' save, eff'n you won't take ma caution an' git yo'self some clo'es like what a Black man wants!"

Molly looked at Charity. Then with a flourish of her skirts and another of her voice, turned back toward Scratch Ankle: "Ain't she a fool? Heah I come all de way from de chu'ch to tell her what happen an' she don't lis'n no mo' den I was de win' a-blowin'."

And Charity, still unheeding, stumbled along beside the amused sheriff up to the steps and through the wide doors of the Wilson County Court House.

## “—Neber Said a Mumblin’ Word”\*

VERNON LOGGINS

*Vernon Loggins is a Texan, with degrees from the University of Chicago, the University of Montpelier, The Sorbonne, and Columbia University. Formerly he taught at the University of Texas, then at New York University, and at present is teaching at Columbia University. He is especially interested in Negro problems and has published a book, The American Negro as Author.*

*His work has appeared in various papers and magazines and the story reprinted herewith was first published in Opportunity, and reprinted in Copy, 1929, where it was awarded the short story prize for that year.*

TOM WHITTLETON, his red face gleaming, his thick blue shirt plotched with patches dark in the wet of perspiration, stalked up his back-gallery steps. When he reached the top, he kicked off his heavy brogans—hurled them bang against the wall, leaned his shotgun in the corner next to the kitchen door, and patted over to the wooden water bucket, which was hanging on a wire fastened to a rafter. “This stuff was drawed yestiddy mornin’!” Nevertheless, he drank three full gourds of it, dipping each time right down to the yellow slimy bottom of the bucket.

His thirst slackened, he slapped his hands against his breast, sent tiny squirts of perspiration darting out from between his fingers. He was satisfied with himself. Hunting rabbits on an April afternoon when the cotton was in the grass and needed

\* From *Opportunity*, April, 1928. Reprinted by permission of Vernon Loggins and *Opportunity*.

“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

plowing wasn't exactly work, and yet it was useful. The long-eared, white-tailed little pests were fine in corn dumplings, just the right sort of grub to make kids grow. It wasn't his fault if the Lord didn't scare up any of the animals for him to take a crack at. He had rambled down the gullies and in the woods looking for them—harder work than following a lazy mule along a furrow. “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.” God had said that to Adam; and he was Adam's son, sweating. Yes, he was satisfied with himself.

“Mama!” he called.

“I'm fixin' the boys' breeches, Papa. Come on out here an' blow a minute,” reeled the whining reply of his wife, Maude, from the front gallery.

He slipped into the hall, his gray-stockinged feet dragging along the smooth pine floor, scoured that morning and still not dry in places. As he passed the parlor door, a nice inspiration came to him. Since he was an elder, blessed with the ceremony of the laying on of hands only the summer before, he could well give the rest of the afternoon to a reading of the Word. He turned and eased into the room, where there was bright-colored straw matting on the floor, over the windows long trailing lace curtains dotted with last year's Sunday school Christmas tree ornaments, and in the most prominent corner a golden-oak what-not adorned with home-made paper flowers, more and more of them and brighter and gayer as he looked from the top to the bottom. Too fancy. He had always felt out of place here, ever since he was a boy and his oldest sister had threatened him with a spanking if he came prowling around where she was entertaining her beaux. Ugh. Hadn't all this been his own for years now, the pretty as well as the homely? Why, before very long beaux would come courting his own daughter. Addie Bird was thirteen her last birthday, and soon there would be plenty of boys setting their caps for her.

Reassured and proud and master-like, he strode over to the center table and picked up a much-worn Bible, with a limp cover projecting into a skimpy ruffle around the edges. The

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

touch of the Book in his hands gave him a feeling of righteousness, and he walked out on the front gallery and sat down in a rocking chair near his wife, who was in the act of putting the finishing touches to a neat pair of patches on the seat of their son Bob's pants.

"You needn' be readin' for prayer meetin' tonight, Papa. Alice was here right after dinner, an' she said that ol' Brother Cooke come ridin' up to her gate this mornin' 'bout leben o'clock. I-'low he'll be holdin' preachin' tonight."

"Ol' Brother Cooke? He ain't been in this neighborhood in fifteen year! What'd he go to Alice an' Ned's for? Why didn' he come here?"

"She didn' tell me that." Silence—during which Mrs. Whittleton took off her spectacles and looked down the road. "Them chillun's late gittin' from school." More silence—except for a nimble needle making little fine stitches in tough cotton cloth and Tom Whittleton's big gnarled thumb following clumsily the lines of the Forty-sixth Psalm. "Any way 't ain't any o' us what needs a preacher's company. An' as for Alice—she's lived a faithful Christian ever since she come through. But Ned, even if he is y'r brother—well, back-slidin' like he does, I'd hate to be in his shoes when he gits up to the judgment house on the streets o' pearl."

She might have been saying, "Scat, Jack Robinson!" so far as her husband was concerned. "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High." He was on the banks of that wondrous river, in company with a host of saints, all of them with their wings lowered in humble and comely manner. The waters were sparkling with the brilliance of the July sun, but his eyes, transfigured by the grace of Jesus Christ, were not dazzled. Transfigured by the grace of Jesus Christ, he had a pretty way of reasoning things out, even when his mind was in the ecstasy of a heavenly vision.

"Papa, here comes them two boys, an' Addie Bird ain't with

“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

’em!” Maude Whittleton sighed, dropped her sewing in her lap, and looked up anxiously.

Bob and Marvin, aged fifteen and fourteen respectively, leaped over the board fence separating the yard from the open horse lot, wheeled around the flower beds—phlox and verbenas blooming—sprang up to the front gallery, and threw down their dirty oilcloth book satchels and dinner pails. They were in a feverish hurry about something.

“What’s the matter with you two youngsters?” snarled their mother. “Ain’t I done tol’ you not to leave Addie Bird come home by herself, with all these black bucks doin’ nothin’ but traipse up an’ down the road day an’ night?”

“Augh—she had to stay in. She don’t never know her spellin’,” retorted Bob, who had inherited his mother’s peculiar whine. “An’ we couldn’ wait. There’s a crowd cuttin’ a bee tree over in the Henson pasture, an’ we’re goin’ to git some honey.”

“Wanta come, Papa?” suggested Marvin, who had examined his father’s expression and had decided that Bob was too sure.

“You ain’t goin’ to take a step to the Henson pasture,” said Tom Whittleton, patriarchal. He had laid his Bible down on the floor by his chair, and was standing up straight. “You’re goin’ with me to the cotton patch. Git y’r hoes.”

His sons hung their heads, muttered something about “never havin’ no fun,” and moped around the house in the direction of the log crib where the farming tools were stored.

“You’re too easy on them boys, Tom,” explained Mrs. Whittleton, her apprehensive eyes fixed on the road. “They oughta be whipped. I don’t have a minute’s peace when Addie Bird is out of my sight. I’ve felt that way ever since what happen to that po’ girl up in the Cedar Creek neighborhood las’ fall.”

“Ain’t you never goin’ to git through talkin’ about that? The niggers aroun’ here know their place. I ain’t the deputy sheriff o’ this beat for nothin’.”

The sharp grinding noise of hoes being filed came from the back yard, and Mr. Whittleton, content that he was training his

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

offspring to know the blessings of such honest toil as Moses had enjoined upon the children of Israel, started for his shoes. Just as he was entering the hall door, piercing shrieks, repeated screams, broke the afternoon stillness of the oak-bordered road.

"It's Addie Bird, Tom! My God!"

One glance at the anguish in his wife's ashen stupefied face,—and he dashed off the gallery, down the front walk, pushed the yard gate open with such force that a hinge was wrenched split, and ran madly towards the frenzied screams. Around the bend by the duck pond he rushed, and there was his little daughter flying up the middle of the sandy road, her long yellow hair in a straight stream behind her, her hands jerking furiously, her short skirt worked up above her knees by her fast-moving legs.

"Papa! Papa!" she cried, in a spasm of relief, as he sped on to meet her. Soon her palpitating body was folded in his arms.

"What's happen, my chil'? Tell me!"

But her breath was wheezing in quick nervous pants, and she was speechless. He nestled her hot head against his bosom, and turned to retrace his steps back to the house, carrying her along as though she were still a baby.

"Tom! Tom! Is she dead?" called Mrs. Whittleton, just on the other side of the duck pond.

"No, Mama!" cried the girl, relaxed enough now to break into a fit of tears.

The dread-driven woman, followed by her two boys, appeared from around the bend. She came on desperately, clutched the sobbing child, and held her tightly.

"It's y'r kind ol' mother that's got you now, sweetie! Don't cry no mo'. Come, an' say what made the lil angel lamb holler like that!"

The father and sons looked on in a passive wonder. There was more coaxing, and soon Addie Bird was in condition to speak.

"I stopped at the bendin' oak," she said, in a shambling voice, "an' put down my things to pull some violets. I heard somep'n



“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

in the woods, an’ I was scared it was a mad dog, an’ when I looked up a nigger was crawlin’ through the fence. He come runnin’ towards me, an’ when I started away he whistled an’ said for me to wait an’ he wouldn’ hurt me, jus’ like that nigger done up on Cedar Creek.”

“God protect us po’ women! It’s right in our own home at last! I knew it! I felt it comin’!”

“Where’s he went, Addie Bird? Had you ever seen ’im befo’? Go on an’ tell me everything. I’m y’r Papa, an’ have got to know!”

“I looked back once, an’ he was wavin’ his han’ at me to foller ’im up the Gladish road, an’—”

The horrified faces of her mother and father and brothers threw the child into another terror, and her words were lost in a fresh paroxysm of screams.

Tom Whittleton, his brow stern and dreadful with determination, fixed his eyes on Bob and Marvin.

“Go to them fellows cuttin’ that bee tree in the Henson pasture, an’ tell ’em what’s happen. Run every step o’ the way. Come on, Mama.”

His sons darted into the woods to obey his command, and he snatched his daughter into his arms again and ran to the house with her. His wife, sobbing and crying more violently than the child, struggled along in the sand behind him.

He put Addie Bird down on his own bed, left her in the care of her frantic mother, and made for the telephone in the hall.

Four short rings—his brother’s store, opposite Hopewell Church, where the Gladish and Rock Island bottom roads crossed. Curious ears, at least a dozen of them, followed the custom of the party line and clicked receivers off the hooks. “Stay on, all o’ you. I wants you to hear what I got to say to Ned.” “H’lo,” came his brother’s deep-bassed voice. “Ned, this is Tom. A nigger attacked Addie Bird when she was comin’ home from school. He was last seen turnin’ up the Gladish road. Stir everybody up. We’ve got to find ’im.”

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Without waiting for a word of reply, he thrust the receiver roughly on its resting place, hurried to the back gallery for his shoes and shot-gun, came back to the trunk in the hall for his revolver—emblem of his distinction as an officer of the law—and rushed to the stables and threw a saddle on his red mule. God was on his side, for he had kept that mule from her pasture that afternoon with the vague feeling that he might take a notion to plow a little.

Twenty minutes later, a crowd of men, forty or fifty in number, on foot, mounted on horses and mules, in automobiles, were gathered around the bending oak where Addie Bird had stopped to cull violets. It was a stately and magnificent tree, with its great deep trunk slanting gracefully towards the east. It had bowed before a hundred years of beautiful dawns, and yet it was youthful. Parasitic gray moss and white-berried mistletoe and sapping ivy had made no inroads on its vigorous vitality. Free and strong, it projected its straight rich branches out over the road, on the most shapely of which a long heavy rope was now strung.

One end of it was held in the hands of three men, Tom Whittleton's brother Ned among them; and the other end was being tied around the neck of a tall black Negro, perhaps twenty years old. He was straight and rigid, his bare feet imbedded in the sand, his head thrust back slightly by the knots in the rope under his chin. His awful rolling eyes seemed to stare without seeing the glowering faces about him. His fingers were twitching strangely, making little circles and figures, as though they would in some way exorcise the steel hand-cuffs that bound his wrists.

"For the las' time I asks you," fiercely rang the voice of Tom Whittleton, who was standing just at the foot of the tree, his two young sons near him, "to confess y'r crime."

The Negro remained fixed, a statue of terror. No movement, except in the twirling black fingers.

"This'll make 'im talk," growled Ned Whittleton, and straight-way a pocket-knife was stuck deep in the victim's leg. There was

“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

a faint moan of pain, and blood oozed through the rough denim trousers and trickled down. The sight of it set the gloating onlookers on fire. Grim oaths and hideous curses rumbled, thundered, and more pocket-knives were whisked out and hurled into the body of the Negro.

Still he did not speak.

“He’s guilty!” shouted Tom Whittleton above the passionate uproar. “He’d howl out if he was innocent. Pull ’im up, boys!”

Silence speaks in the affirmative—nothing declared is always yes. The officer of the law reasoned that since he had heard this saying so many times it must be in the Bible, and therefore infallible. Yes, God was on his side, making the path of his duty clear to him.

The deed was done. The tall black body hung stiff and stark in the air. For a few moments there was stillness, broken only by the blood dripping down the dangling legs and sinking heavily into the loose sand below.

Then conversation arose, talk quiet and casual, about the wisdom of keeping niggers in their places, and crops, and mares that were going to foal, and the June elections. Contented, sated, the lynchers dispersed.

Tom Whittleton, leading his submissive red mule, walked slowly up the road in the company of his two boys. When they reached the open place, where his field began, the sun, no more than a half hour high, was shooting wide bands of yellow light right down the cotton rows.

“Didn’ he never say a single word, Papa?” asked Marvin.

“Narry a word,” answered the father. “He was shakin’ like a ague when Ned an’ them fellows found ’im runnin’ through that hump o’ woods at the cross-roads. Nobody couldn’ git nothin’ out o’ him, excep’ a few grunts. They always acts like that when they’s guilty.”

“Didn’ nobody know who he was?”

“No. He was a strange nigger. Musta come from across the river some’rs.”

“Who’s goin’ to cut ’im ’down?”

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Ned's goin' to git ol' Uncle Jerry an' his boys to take 'im to the Rock Island bottom an' bury 'im."

"I thought he'd dance when they pulled 'im up," interposed Bob, who had the habit of going about with his head dropped and was not so inquisitive as his brother. "He didn' do nothin' but hang up there straight."

"I saw his neck gittin' longer. I bet it's more'n two feet by this time," added Marvin.

When they got into the house, they found Addie Bird and her mother in the parlor. The girl had all of her dolls sitting up in a row on the sofa and was pinning paper flowers on them, playing like a child of six, to the delight of her doting mama, who had listened over the telephone and had already heard in detail the relieving tidings of the hanging.

At supper, when a sweet-potato pudding was served because Addie Bird was very fond of it, Tom Whittleton reminded himself and his hungry family that old Brother Cooke would no doubt preach at the prayer meeting at Hopewell Church that night. It was out of the question to think of the baby girl leaving the house after the nerve-racking experience which she had undergone in the afternoon. Maude ought to stay with her. The boys must work their sums, for a man could never know too much arithmetic. Anyway, every blessed soul under Tom Whittleton's roof-tree had confessed Jesus Christ as a personal saviour, and it wasn't a sin if a meeting was missed occasionally, when there was a real excuse. But, as for the father himself, he was an elder and must always go, rain or shine, sickness or health.

Thus the matter was beautifully reasoned out while he and his wife and children ate sweet-potato pudding. When the last morsel was devoured, he got up, emitted a puffed grunt of satisfaction, and then went to comb at his hair and put on a gray coat over his blue shirt, which had been wet with sweat twice that day and was still a little damp. Armed with his Bible and a lantern, he set out, with that sacred feeling which always came over him when he was going to church. The dew hadn't fallen yet, so he

“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

took the short cut through the cotton patch and the stretch of woods up by old Aunt Dora’s house.

There was a waning glow of red in the west, but the stars were out in all their numbers and a full moon swung tranquilly against the milky sky over towards Gladish. Frogs had set up a merry questioning and answering in the duck pond, and whip-poor-wills called playfully to each other along the edge of the woods. The smell of growing April was in the air. The elder, unconscious of his surroundings, left the cotton field and entered the trail leading through the woods. He was thinking hard, trying to decide whether it really would be his duty to run for sheriff when Bill Perry did finally retire. There was nothing to do but trust to God to give him a sign. He passed on by Aunt Dora’s house, a hundred yards in front of it, and saw the old woman sitting on her door-step with the light of the moon falling directly on her round black face.

As he neared the church, the singing started, all the congregation, and a big one too, repeating lustily—

When the roll is called up yonder I’ll be there!

He loved the songs that told about heaven—his inheritance as a child of God, and the inheritance of Maude and the three kids also. Listening intently, he stole up to the little porch at the entrance of the church, and slipped his lantern, which he had not lighted, under the steps. He would not go in until the chorus was ended, since it was as bad to interrupt a hymn of praise as it was to walk into a sanctuary while a preacher or elder was leading a prayer.

“Tom,” spoke his brother just behind him.

“Hello, Ned. You here?”

“Yep. I wanted to fin’ out what ol’ man Cooke had to say to-night. He’s all shook up over what happened this evenin’. Alice said he come pretty near faintin’ when he foun’ out that there’d been a hangin’ right under his nose. He went in the front room an’ got down on his knees an’ prayed for hours, didn’ eat no supper.”

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Well, I do declare. That's funny."

"I think the ol' man must be kinda crazy."

"He was a rip-roarin' soul-winner in his day. Let's go in befo' another song starts. There's Alice over next to the front window holdin' a place for you."

"Wait a minute. There's somep'n else I wanted to tell y'u. Uncle Jerry an' his boys cut down that nigger, an' the ol' man sent 'em on to Rock Island bottom with 'im an' come back home to do the feedin'. The blamed fools got it into their heads that it'd bring bad luck to touch a hangin' tree an' they lef' the rope there. Couldn't you git it when you go by on your way home? We oughtn' not to leave it there."

"Sho, I'll git it. It'll make a good pair o' tetherin' ropes for the cows."

The two brothers entered the church. Ned did not join his wife, but slouched down in the first vacant seat he came to in the back. Tom, setting a good example by holding his Bible so that everybody could see it, made straight for his accustomed place in the amen corner.

If they expected anything exciting from the visiting preacher, they were to be disappointed. The old man might have come into the church with a special message, but now that he faced his hearers he was afraid to voice it. For an hour he talked vaguely and incomprehensibly about Christians keeping the peace of God in their hearts. The congregation, among whom Tom Whittleton counted twenty who had helped at the hanging, grew fidgety. Nobody seemed to be touched except Sister Henson, who kept putting her handkerchief to her eyes. It didn't take much to make that woman cry. Ned left before the sermon was half over, and Tom was disgusted that such a weak-voiced preacher was not put on the superannuated list. What sinners and back-sliders needed was to be scared out of their skins by thundering stories of hell-fire and brimstone, like the tale of the jay bird and eternity.

But at the conclusion of the service something really did happen. "Let us lift our hearts to God in a prayer of silence, and

“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

go meditating on Him to our homes,” said the old man, supporting himself on the pulpit. Tom Whittleton got on his knees and closed his eyes to pray. The church was still, like death. Then, across the fields and through the woods, came the sound of a ringing bell, intermittent peals, louder and clearer after each interval. It was in the direction of Rock Island bottom. God! Those dirty niggers were burying that black beast in the night-time, and were bold enough to toll a funeral knell for him. Every last one of the brutes ought to be wiped out of existence for the outrage.

The officer of the law straightened up from his knees, looked about, and saw that heads were being raised and necks craned all over the house. Then for one long moment his eyes were fixed on the unearthly, bowed face of the aged preacher. There was a look in that wizened countenance which he didn’t understand, which all his reason couldn’t for the time explain. It was like a ghost. With the image of it glaring clear in his mind, he broke up the prayer of silence by shuffling roughly out the back door. From there he rushed around to the front for his lantern and was gone before any one else left the church. He must see Ned, for something had to be done about that infernal bell, the inevitable tolling of which was still sounding.

But the knell had ceased before he reached his brother’s yard. Leaning up against the gate post, he lighted his lantern and waited, terrified lest the frightful ringing would set in again. Voices came from the foot of the lane leading up to the house—Alice and the kids and old Brother Cooke. A cold shiver throbbed through him at the thought of looking upon that strange and ghastly countenance again. He ran across the vegetable garden and crawled through a barbed-wire fence out into the main road, and started rapidly towards the bending oak. He wanted to get that rope and be through with this business.

At last he reached the tree, looming up in the silent moonlight, with its great spreading limbs, and broad folding leaves, and new acorns sticking around like little balls. He had always liked this oak. When he and Ned were boys, they used to race and see

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

which one could climb it first. They would crawl up high, straddle their legs across a branch, take hickory nuts from their pockets, and crack them between two rocks, making believe that they were squirrels. Thank God that niggers thought there was a curse on it and would let it alone. But would it ever again be the same to him, now that his little daughter had happened to stop there to gather flowers?

He unwound the rope from the trunk of the tree, stepped back to pull down the end that was suspended above, and his foot struck something solid. It was Addie Bird's book satchel, buried in the sand, and on one side of it there was a splotch of dried blood as big as his hand. He would bury the things somewhere. No. Mama could wash off that stain and the satchel would be as good as new.

Burdened with the Bible, the lantern, the satchel, and the rope, now made into a neat roll, he trudged on towards home. When he reached the duck pond, a strange uncanny sound came to him from somewhere in the woods. That bell was tolling again. No, it was somebody singing—a nigger woman—old Aunt Dora. He stood still and listened. She must be on her doorstep, where he had seen her two hours before, with the moon shining right down on her black face. The words fell distinctly on his ears.

Dey pierced Him in de side,  
An' He neber said a mumblin' word.  
Dey pierced Him in de side,  
An' He neber said a mumblin' word—  
Not a word—not a word—not a word.

De blood come twinklin' down,  
An' He neber said a mumblin' word.  
De blood come twinklin' down,  
An' He neber said a mumblin' word—  
Not a word—not a word—not a word.

Held as though charmed, he heard the song to the end. Then, in no way aware of what he was doing, he impulsively hurled the book satchel and the bundle of rope into the pond. The loud



“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

splashes in the water brought him back to himself. That old woman had no right to make him destroy things. A farmer worth his salt never knew what it was to have too much rope, and it would take five dollars to replace those school books. He would show her who could pay for them. She mustn’t forget that she was working a few acres of his land on halves, and that next fall when the year’s profits were divided he would do the figuring. Her half wouldn’t amount to more than a gourd.

He went on, and did not stop again until he reached his house, where everything was dark and silent. He flopped down in his rocking chair, set his lantern up on the arm of the swing, and opened his Bible to read. A few verses here and there would calm his mind, get him ready for a good night’s sleep. “The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” No. He could see nothing in the heavens but the yellowish sickly moon—like the countenance of old man Cooke, staring at him. And something was holding him down—the weight of that cursed rope and blood-stained book satchel. And there was a continual ringing in his ears—that funeral bell, and old Aunt Dora’s song—

Dey pierced Him in de side,  
An’ He neber said a mumblin’ word.

He turned the leaves, and a trembling terror gripped him as he read: “Thou shalt not kill.” But a soldier who had fought in France had explained to him what that commandment really meant. The chaplains always read it, “Thou shalt do no murder,” and that was the way God meant it when he handed it down to Moses. Germans had to be killed during the war, beeves and hogs had to be slaughtered, fryers had to have their necks wrung, rats had to be choked in traps, and sometimes niggers had to be hung. It was easy to see how clear that was.

But maybe the nigger whom he had sent to death that afternoon had meant no harm to Addie Bird, and shouldn’t have been killed. Could niggers possibly have souls? He would open the Bible just anywhere and what his eyes fell upon would give

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

him light on an answer to that question. God had helped him solve many a problem in this way. He turned the pages again, and saw: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The meek?

Dey pierced Him in de side,  
An' He neber said a mumblin' word.

Cowering in horror, seeing the finger of a wrathful God pointed at him and directing him to that hell of flames which he had so many times warned sinners against, Tom Whittleton dropped his Bible to the floor and covered his face with his rough hands. He was aroused from his agonizing reverie by a horse galloping up the road towards his house. From the hind feet dragging in the sand, he recognized it as Ned's mare, and he was waiting at the gate when his brother arrived.

"Tom," began Ned, anxiety in his voice, "have you heard anything about Sheriff Perry resignin'? I think you'd better go to West Falls in the mornin' an' see 'im."

"Didn' I tell you about that?" replied Tom somewhat relieved. "There ain't nothin' to it. He's jus' puttin' out that rumor in case anybody runs again' him in the primary. Then he could use it in his campaign that he wanted to quit an' the people wouldn' let 'im. I had dinner with 'im las' Sa'day, an' we talked it all over. He wants me to keep on as deputy in this beat."

"Well, that takes a load off'n my mind. I heard it from Luke Wallis to-night, an' if Perry'd git out an' the wrong sort o' man'd git in befo' the grand jury meets, you an' me an' some more fellows aroun' here might be in for it."

"What do yo' mean?"

"That nigger we hung this evenin' was innocent."

"Innocent? Don' say that! How do y'u know?"

"Ol' Jerry's boys foun' out who he was when they got down to Rock Island with 'im. He'd been plowin' for Luke Wallis a week or two, an' I rode down to see Luke to git things straight. He was a West Falls nigger, an' this evenin' a telephone message come for 'im that his mammy was sick, about to die. When we

“—NEBER SAID A MUMBLIN’ WORD”

caught ’im he was hurryin’ to Gladish to ketch the train to go to her.”

“But why didn’ he explain things to us?”

“There was a mighty good reason,” Ned went on, half laughing. “He couldn’, ’cause he was deaf and dumb.”

“It’s a lie! He hollered to Addie Bird to wait!”

“Augh—Maude has spoiled that kid so that she’s scared o’ her shadow an’ is likely to imagine anything.”

“You’re jokin’ with me! Tell me ’tain’t so! Tell me, that that nigger wasn’ deaf an’ dumb!” Tom Whittleton’s whole body was shaking, and he had caught hold of the palings to steady himself. “Ned, do you believe niggers is got souls?”

“My God, Tom!” exclaimed Ned, disgusted. “Are you goin’ crazy? Since you been an elder you ain’t like yourself. I’m jus’ as good a Christian as you, but I’ll be damned if religion has made me a chicken-hearted fool. Of course niggers ain’t got no souls! I’d rather hang a real brute any day, but one that’s deaf an’ dumb is better’n none at all. Here. Take a swig o’ this white-mule an’ brace up.”

Tom Whittleton took the opened bottle which his brother was holding out to him. “Look not upon the wine when it is red.” But it wasn’t red. It was watery. Color! He held the bottle to his lips and took a long draft of the fiery liquid. Color! Why, everything depended upon color! A mule often lost her hearing when she strained herself in pulling a heavy load up a hill, and he had a cow once so dumb she couldn’t utter a sound. Her durned calf would see her shaking her head and wagging her tail and understand her just as though she were mooing. Color and souls and brutes. Why hadn’t he used that head which God had given him? Things were so simple when a man reasoned a little.

“I don’ like ol’ man Cooke’s way o’ actin’,” Ned was saying. “I’m goin’ to give ’im a strong hint in the mornin’ to be pushin’ on. We want a preacher in here like that fellow Graham over in Montgomery County. By golly, he led a lynchin’ hisself not long ago. What do y’u think about an intimidatin’ raid? Luke Wallis says he’ll see that there ain’t no talk among his niggers

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

about this hangin', but I think we ought to scare the res' of 'em up a little too. They didn' have no business to toll that bell to-night."

"Intimidatin' raid?" answered Tom enthusiastic. "Sho. Make it tomorrow night. I'll tell all the fellows I see to meet at the bendin' oak at ten o'clock. We'll tackle ol' Dora first o' all. I wants to see that ol' woman shake till she coughs her gills up so's she can never sing no mo'. An' say, Ned. Bring along a quart or two o' that white-mule if y'u got it to spare."

"All right. It's good stuff, ain't it? So long. See you tomorrow."

He rode away, and Tom Whittleton walked heavily upon his gallery. Since God had given him peace of heart, what would the Word say to him now? He picked up his Bible, opened it at random, and held it in the light of the lantern to read: "For rulers are not a terror to the good works, but to the evil." Rulers? That was simple enough. It was what he had been looking for, the sign, direct from heaven, that he should run for sheriff when Bill Perry retired. Yes, the Lord was on his side.

Glowing with satisfaction, he took his Bible into the fancy parlor, placed it reverently on the center table, and blundered into his bedroom without waking his wife. Ugh. Mama had Addie Bird in bed with her. He'd rather sleep on the cot in the boys' room anyway, for Maude's snoring was getting to be something terrible.

## The Last Full Measure \*

MARIAN SIMS

*Marian Sims is a southern writer, living in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her The Last Full Measure is a Negro story showing a gayer side of the black man's temperament than did those by Worth Tuttle and Vernon Loggins and containing no accusation against the white man for his injustice toward his colored brother. Two stories dealing with these characters have appeared in The Saturday Evening Post.*

WHEN the fight first began, the neighbors merely shrugged their shoulders. "Zora an' Sprawnatrice done fell out agin," they said to one another, and went on about their business.

But when a flatiron sailed through the open window and broke a toe for Rosebud Jackson, who was making mud pies on the sidewalk, they decided to mediate. Sprawnatrice had been screaming for some time then, but Sprawnatrice always screamed when she and Zora fought, so there was nothing unusual in that. It was the flatiron that alarmed them—Zora's mighty arm would never have flung an iron so wildly unless more than ordinary wrath had spoiled his aim.

The neighbors shouted and banged before they went in, not out of delicacy but in self-defense. Sprawnatrice might have another iron. And even if there were no more irons, there were other things that could be hurled, such as lamps and skillets. One of the neighbors peeped through a broken panel in the door, but couldn't see anything; so they waited a discreet moment and listened.

\* From *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 27, 1934. Reprinted by permission of Marian Sims and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

While they were waiting, the screams stopped with disconcerting suddenness, and Zora said something they couldn't catch. He wasn't calling Sprawnatrice anything; he was asking her a question in a rather high-pitched voice. They gathered courage at that and went in.

They noticed Zora first, because he was standing up. He had something in his hand which he wiped quickly on his sleeve as they came in. They didn't know what it was until they saw Sprawnatrice; then they guessed.

She was lying on the floor, making feeble noises, like a pig that has been stuck. There was blood all around her, and most of it seemed to be coming from her throat. The neighbors didn't move for a minute; they looked first at her and then at one another. Although they would never have presumed to say so, they felt Zora had overreached himself this time.

Zora spoke first, chiefly because the silence was getting on his nerves. "Ain't none o' you crazy fools got any sense? Git a ambulance, somebody, an' git huh to th' hosspital." He closed the knife and put it in his pocket.

One neighbor objected: "They ain' gonna take no cullud woman at the hosspital."

"Then git a cah an' git huh to the doctuh's. Fust thing we know, she'll be dyin' heah an' I'll have to leave town."

They could do that, and they did. They commandeered a battered car, and, clothed in a brief, reflected glory, they drove her to the doctor's office. Fortunately, the doctor was in. Fortunately, that is, for Zora.

The doctor took Negro patients because he hadn't had much success with white ones and it was that or starve. He did know, however, that if he gave Sprawnatrice ether in her present condition, she'd never come out of it; so he called for volunteers to hold her while he sewed her up. He had no difficulty in getting them, but one of them was violently ill before it was over. The job was worse than he had bargained for.

After the operation they took her home in triumph. Others of the neighbors had thoughtfully washed up the floor and turned

## THE LAST<sup>1</sup> FULL MEASURE

down the quilts to receive her, and one of them agreed to spend the night and look after her. Zora, wearing an air of injured innocence, had been taken into custody as soon as the news got about, but his discomfort was somewhat alleviated by the fact that he was the first transient to occupy the new jailhouse, and that he could now give first-hand information regarding its advantages and disadvantages over the old one.

When the solicitor heard about the fight, he grinned broadly and triumphantly. He was a good solicitor, the Nemesis of extralegal North Georgia, and Zora had been a thorn in his flesh for a long time.

"I've been trying to get something on that nigger for three years," he told the judge, when he heard of it. "He's been in every shooting and cutting scrape since I've had this job, and we've never pinned it on him yet. This will get him out of the way for at least five years." And he prepared to summon Sprawnatrice before the grand jury as soon as she was able to appear.

Sprawnatrice drowsed for two days. If she'd been anyone else she would have died, but she wasn't. At the end of two days she awoke, refreshed and fortified.

"Where Zora?" was her first question.

"In jail, honey. He ain' gon' bothuh you no more." It was the same obliging neighbor. She enjoyed the distinction.

"How come he's in jail?" Sprawnatrice was wondering if he'd been caught bootlegging at last.

"Fo' tryin' to cahve you up, the lousy houn'."

Sprawnatrice was dumfounded; she hadn't dreamed she was so important. A feeling of resentment against Zora was born.

"I hope he stay there till judgment," she said, and went back to sleep.

The next day she got up. It was the longest she'd ever stayed in bed except when Theatre was born, then she'd had to stay five days. She put her chair on the sidewalk and held court, regaling anyone who would stop to listen with details of the fight and the number of stitches necessary to repair the damage.

When the solicitor heard she was up, he drove down to inter-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

view her. His arrival caused something of a panic in the district, although not so much of one as a visit from the chief of police would have done.

"Are you Sprawnatrice?" he asked, when the audience was dispersed.

"Yassuh."

"Where on earth did you get that name?" asked the solicitor, to satisfy his wife's curiosity. Negro names were a hobby with her, and this one sounded like a corruption of "straw mattress."

"My paw dreamt it."

"I see. Well, Sprawnatrice, I guess you know Zora nearly got you this time."

"Yassuh."

"And that the only way to keep him from finishing it up is to put him on the gang for a while."

"Yassuh."

"All right, then," he suggested; "suppose you tell me how it happened."

Sprawnatrice told him. The argument had started, she said, over Zora's putting salt instead of sugar in his coffee, and blaming her for putting the salt dish in his way. She gave a graphic round-by-round description of the bout up to the time the neighbors took it over, but after that her memory was a trifle hazy.

"All right," said the solicitor, who was rejoicing inwardly. "I want you to come up and tell this to the grand jury tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

Then he asked a few more questions: "How long have you and Zora been married?"

"We ain' married," Sprawnatrice explained. "He boa'ds with me."

"I see." Privately, the solicitor thought Zora took undue liberties for a boarder. "How long has he boarded with you?"

"Goin' on two years. We wuz aimin' to get married las' month," she added, "but my husban' come back from Chattanooga an' he's been roun' both'in' me again. I might git me some o' them divo'ce papuhs if he stays heah."



## THE LAST FULL MEASURE

The solicitor wasn't disconcerted; he'd been a solicitor now for nearly three years. Instead he got into his car and drove away, leaving Sprawnatrice to chew her cud of triumph. Decidedly, this was her hour, and she reveled in it.

It was soon after this that Washington Brown came by with a message.

"Zora say you sho done him dirt, Sprawnatrice. Say it look like you would come an' see 'im, up theah sta'vin' an' freezin' at the jailhouse. I tol' 'im I'd tell you, an' mebbe you'd bake 'im a cake, or somethin'."

Sprawnatrice began to feel sorry for Zora. In her hour of victory she felt she could afford to be magnanimous, and so she spent the entire evening baking an elaborate coconut cake to take to the jail on her way to court.

Zora had found out enough about the inner workings of the new jail to assure him of an audience, and he was ready to leave. He was somewhat chastened by the time Sprawnatrice and the cake arrived. Also, he had had an inspiration.

"Sugah, you sho' is good to yo' ol' man." He peered wistfully through the bars, his voice fairly dripping honey.

Sprawnatrice felt an ecstatic shiver course along her spine. There was magic in Zora's honeyed voice that dulled the memory of her wrongs. She thawed perceptibly.

"I baked you this heah cake 'cause I 'lowed you mus' be hongry," she explained nonchalantly.

"I is hongry. An' they ain't nobody can bake cakes lak yourn."

Sprawnatrice shivered again. She had forgotten, in her anger, just how irresistible Zora was. His bare bronze arms looked strong enough to wrench the bars apart. She began to doubt the advisability of sending him up.

Zora didn't even doubt. He began his campaign: "Wheah you goin', honey?"

"Up to the cou'thouse."

"How come?"

"To 'pear befo' the gran' jury." She said it with reluctant pride. Zora looked injured. "Whut you go'n' tell 'em?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Sprawnatrice wasn't at all sure. She hesitated and was lost.

"Honey, you know I wuz playin' the othuh night. You know I nevuh meant to cut you," he protested humbly.

She felt herself slipping. Zora felt her slipping, too, and he pressed his advantage: "Who's gon' look aftuh you an' Theayter ef Ise on the gang? Didn' I give you a dollah jus' las' week to buy huh some shoes?"

Sprawnatrice had forgotten that. She had also forgotten that he'd eaten on the strength of that dollar for days. Nobody could make a dollar go farther than Zora; he'd been known to make one last him a month. But Sprawnatrice couldn't answer his arguments any more than she could resist his blandishments. She decided that the safest course was flight.

"Don' go, sugah," Zora pleaded, taking her arm through the bars. "Stay a few mo' minutes."

Sprawnatrice stayed. She stayed so long that she was ten minutes late in appearing before the grand jury, a fact that disconcerted her considerably. She faced the twenty-four men with panic in her heart.

They eyed her stolidly: to them she was merely a participant in another "nigger cuttin' scrape." If anyone had suggested that she was Pathos, they would probably have asked who the devil that was. She had made a brave attempt to array herself in a manner befitting the occasion, but no one but Sprawnatrice would have realized it, since even her best clothes had long ago taken on the protective coloration of Mother Earth. In a moment of dizzy extravagance she had bought her dress at a church rummage sale for seventy-five cents. It had once been bright blue taffeta, but it had gone the way of all taffeta, and she hadn't been able to match it when she put the patches on. It was still her best dress, though; it had once belonged to a banker's wife.

Her shoes didn't exactly match the dress, either. They had belonged to the husband of a lady for whom she washed, and she'd got them in part payment for a week's wash. They had made quite a hole in her income, so she was wearing them a long time. Her hat was Zora's best green felt, but Zora didn't

## THE LAST FULL MEASURE

need it right now, so she was taking advantage of her opportunity. Somehow, since Zora's *regnum* and the advent of Theatre, her wardrobe wasn't even as adequate as it had once been, although it never occurred to her to correlate the two facts.

The solicitor was very polite to her, but she hesitated to look at him. She sensed dimly that he wouldn't be quite so polite later on.

There were a few preliminaries before he got to the crux of the matter. "Will you tell these gentlemen," he said finally, "what happened last Tuesday evening?"

Sprawnatrice wriggled her toes in the well-ventilated shoes and swallowed hard. "Me an' Zora wuz eatin' supper," she began, "an' aftuh it wuz ovah Zora got out his knife an' commenced to peel a apple."

"You told me," said the solicitor, with a premonitory qualm, "that he called you a good-for-nothing she-devil and drew the knife on you."

"Naw, suh, he wuz peelin' a apple."

"All right. Go on."

"An' I commenced takin' off the dishes. An' when I went roun' to git his plate I tickled him."

"You what?" demanded the solicitor sternly.

"Tickled him," Sprawnatrice repeated. And swallowed again. "An' Zora reached up to tickle me an' we commenced wrastlin'."

The solicitor's face had taken on a brickish hue. "Cut out that foolishness," he ordered, "and tell this jury the truth. You can be sent up for lyng, you know."

Sprawnatrice swallowed once more. "It's the trufe," she insisted.

"Go on, then."

"An' while we wuz wrastlin' I ducked an' got in the way o' Zora's knife. And when he seen it had cut me, he said, 'Why, honey, did I hurt you?' An' then th' othuhs come in an' Zora made 'em git a cah quick an' they taken me to th' doctuh's. An' thass all."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

The solicitor looked as if he might explode any minute. "What about that flatiron that came through the window?"

"Zora tho'ed it at a big rat an' missed him."

"Why were you screaming bloody murder all the time?"

"'Cause I'm awful ticklish. I cain't stand to be tickled."

The solicitor began all over again. He threatened and cajoled and bullied. He paced the floor in his anger, recalling something that Lincoln had said about the last full measure of devotion. But Zora had had a wide experience in telling how things happened, and Sprawnatrice had learned her lesson—not wisely, perhaps, but too well. She ended every answer with: "Zora nevuh meant to do it. It wuzn't his fault."

In the end, the solicitor gave up. He was on the verge of apoplexy and he had to. And Sprawnatrice hurried home to prepare for the coming of her lord.

She washed and scrubbed and cooked. Her throat caused her some discomfort, but she disregarded it completely. And Zora came home in triumph a few hours later.

She met him at the door in a state of pulsating eagerness. "Honey, I sho' is glad to have you back."

Zora scowled. He had decided that it was all Sprawnatrice's fault, and he had to vent his grudge first. After that he would forget it until the next time.

"Shut yo' loud mouf," he ordered, "an' git me some vittles."

## Excursion into Dimension \*

BENJAMIN APPEL

*Benjamin Appel is a young New Yorker whose work, originally published in a number of the "little" magazines, is now being sought by a wider market. Knopf published his first novel in 1934 (to be published in England also); another novel will appear soon. Various of his stories have been included in both the O. Henry Anthology and Edward J. O'Brien's Best Short Stories of 1934. His Excursion into Dimension is an example of the modern, experimental story, a fantasia of mental dimension.*

FIVE men sat in the last car of the Continental Limited like bugs on a comet's tail. They were parasites on a power that roared of coal devoured and the inevitability of steel trekking into horizon after horizon. Dreary twilight . . . the darker sky nestled a land revealing in all its breadth, the hand of a mighty troll who had labored, and was biding eternity before finishing something that must be finished, so intolerable the idea that these great contours were to remain forever in their present. *Whuu* cried the whistle.

But all this was outside the windows. Inside, the five began to elude the Sphinx of which they were the transient nucleus. They joked. Their laughter swelled. The atmosphere became more human, cozier.

Hahaha . . . Didja hear? Hell, no . . . You'll have another . . . You dirty dog, you . . .

Congeniality flourished salty and brave. No one cared whether the train shot its jointed arrow into a concept that was the Pacific

\* From *The Outlander*, a quarterly literary review, summer, 1933. Reprinted by permission of Benjamin Appel and *The Outlander*.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Coast, or into a pig's behind. But the outside universe abode in their uneasiness. They knew the flatlands rolled behind a white mane of smoke. They knew the lion-thewed locomotive charged into the prairies, charged into the fertile monotones of midwestern America. They were irritated that this thing of man's contrivance defied the roc wing of sky, hushed stupendous on creation. Puff. Puff. Their minds were drowned in noise. They wanted to escape into a cheerier atmosphere less suggestive of chugging. This journey through a country immense and desolate gagged them.

Give us a drink. . . .

"I'd fill the prairies up with cement." Wilkins tootled his humor like a bugle. He ceased to gape at dream acres, substanceless. . . . "How many times have I told you eggs I sell cement? Best there is. I'd make a skating rink out of the whole blame country."

They were sufficiently groggy to welcome the notion with alcoholic pedantry.

"I'd cover it with leather," said Porter. The train's constant seeking made his guts melancholy. He was unlike the stuff he sold. His pink face was flowered with ripe flesh; it appeared as if it might dissolve at a sudden shock. He shouted with a braggart's upcurled mouth. "Looka me. I'm well off. The crash didn't catch me. I could cover the world with leather."

"Hell! I want a snifter," pleaded the student. "If you guys can't tell good stories and must waste your time on such fables as covering the plains with cement, leather, and such manure, well, then, give me a drink."

"Ain't he a corker?" praised Wilkins. He had brown eyes that could be amicable only when looking into the universe rimmed by a cocktail. "What would you fill 'em up with, you son of a gun?"

"Me? Boundless knowledge for me. With a little help from Doc if he hasn't forgotten his items, we'll do education proud."

The doctor's yellowish face shivered. "My education's only continued in the line of jokes. Have you heard the story of the

## EXCURSION INTO DIMENSION

wench who had two babies within the week?" Have you ever heard . . . wench . . . babies . . . the train repeated again and again. Good God, again there was a revolt of wheels canting Bound Metal. . . . He thought, iron is a Caliban in bondage. Iron . . . iron. "I like business men. Pass a law compelling people to spend six hours daily on trains and we'd have Utopia. Train rides are rotten." His cranial head had no reason to be junctured to his gauntness.

One of those beans, the student meditated, that should be isolated in a lab. That's the fourth story he's forgotten to finish. Where should my bean be? I'm young and I have morning-glory yaller curls. It belongs on a girl's breast.

Rye browned on ice as Wilkins shook. Prim, silken, his body seemed to cry: I sell, I sell. "Which reminds me of the student with the woman college president. Pass me, says the student. Pass what, says the W.C.P. Haha. You dirty dogs. Know that one?"

But they boomeranged the haha back at him. What did Joe Concrete want to do? Fill 'em up with jokes?

"What's wrong with the plains as they are?" asked the fifth man. "What's wrong, I ask, and if you folks can answer except to insult the west, I'll be delighted."

Wilkins and Porter howled. Nothing was wrong with them if one made a living from them like Smith. The fox . . . I know sister Annie, I know Smithy. . . . He sells tractors, and farm machinery; he sells the farmers, the bozo, the wise guy.

Smith stood himself a drink. Defender of the free, home of the brave. He'd done right by the noble stretches. Yes, sir. He stood himself a second, patriotically. His taut skin vibrated as the train screeched like a disconsolate genie, obedient but vengeful. Fifteen years ago not an ounce'd have quivered, so tight the skin over the almost-Indian cheekbones.

"Nuts," said the student. He listened to the storm of speed. The unleashment of power was like a tiger gliding through thickets. With what strength, what fierceness, this beast prowls the quiet hell of darkness; the humans carried as if in an enfang-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

ment. The train's electric-orbed onslaught must be nice to watch.

A station, red lights, a stationmaster, vanish like a scene in Hades.

"If I'm not personal," the doctor asked, "why do you Californians quest eastward to study?"

"Women."

Devil take it. The boy's coily plump with life. He gives a true answer. I'll nod my bloodless face. Women . . . you tall unhipped beauties of Salt Lake. I remember in this jolting. Primroses of Boston; there is the swish and swirl of your fading. "Have you heard the tale of the Kansas matron and the business man? I like business men. . . ."

Undoubtedly nuts, thought the student. "Do you like train rides, Doc?"

"No. I don't like destiny trapped in power. Men haven't the right to wheel Jove's bolts. Why should we ape the motion of the gods; who are men? What right has a pawnbroker to wear seven league boots? Why should a peddler be winged like an angel? Boy, you mustn't get me worked up."

"Here's a drink," said Smith. The Doc's a shrewd cuss. I'll bet he smells the Injun blood in me.

"Thanks!" Smith's thin face has gathered flesh. "You must remind me to tell you the one of the two explorers."

The student attended the beautiful song of the locomotive, the Ariels fettered in coal, iron, precision, the princely Ariel bounded by human brain and slaving in a thought become the Limited. "You're right, Doc. Modern science is wonderful. But what ignoble usage. Here, this great train is rushing us west on the cheapest sort of traffic, for leather, concrete and good times. It beats all. We've airplanes to carry profiteers, swine, charlatans, all with medieval minds."

They were outraged but during these years, gold had been proven less than clay; the money cult a snare, not of metal, but of slime. High priests Wilkins, Porter, Smith, grinned like men who'd like to be fanatic yet admit logic in diluted doses.

Smith blinked at the doctor. His ancestors had galloped mus-



## EXCURSION INTO DIMENSION

tangs in bison hunt; he was helling westward to meet a harlot in Los Angeles. I wonder if he's wise to me, the weasel?

The doctor thought, the kid's green inside, alive with sun, ideals. I'm old.

The train spoke. *ARurrrr*. . . . Concentration shook on its iron pedestal. The wheels spun. The last car seemed on a lonely wending toward a hell of machines where doom was subtle among the accuracies. Through a vast and repeated space the train rocketed. Waste, empty as star darkness, hollowed about their coming towards an unknown moon. The student shut his eyes. Laughter exploded about him, penetrating his utter marrow. . . . Oh, wonder train, how unappreciated you are. Is it the booze? it must be the booze; or, are we traveling up an inclined plane? then, at our speed, we're higher than the highest mountains . . . what are trains made of? hypnotic their strength. Yet on their whale terror men converse. Porter isn't leather. He has a big red mug. *ARurrrr*. . . . The doctor intones the insipid Ah of melancholy; "the man who never completed a joke." Wilkins isn't concrete. Smith isn't metal. Oh, the infamy that men are not as sturdy as the things they sell, or, thewed like the trains in which they journey! . . .

Porter was worshipping his eight-cylinder. "It goes like the devil." He told the parable how on one miraculous day it beat out a Mercedes, a Rolls, and lesser fry.

The train comments. *ARurrrr*. . . . This bolted Frankenstein, this mighty organism of speed with guts stronger than coal, mocks the passengers.

"We need more drinks to beat It." The doctor tapped his chin. "Men grow like weeds and perish like them; that's our fate, but when we ride in trains we are like immortal wasps darting through the slow webbing of death."

The locomotive tore into time's flank, gobbling up miles; a quaint brute; of the genii; what else'd eat the leagues and hours?

"Doc needs a stiff one," said Wilkins.

"Thanks. Have you chaps heard the one of the capital OF who couldn't mate with a FROM?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Nuts," the student muttered. "Do you ever finish a story? It's spooky."

"Sometimes, but on rides the train finishes anything I have to say. Listen to the damn thing."

"Nuts!"

Smith was wobbling in his chair to the nauseous rhythm of too much liquor. Too much sweet infernal lingering. Wilkins and Porter nodded at the doctor, who, eyes blinking, permitted his stories to creep out tired, almost despite himself. The student hoisted his hand, seemed to be using a derrick, let it drop. The hand was feeble, disloyal to his body.

Between each moment the continents were strung. It was a typical traveling man's atmosphere. Faster, faster. Hearing, sense, sight, taste, were fletched to smoking wings. Still faster away from twentieth-century consciousness, away from the iron trains, the prairies belted in by telegraph and radio, away into the old-new world of whiskey, jokes, sleepiness.

Another atmosphere . . . auld acquaintance be forgot. . . . How attractive they appeared to one another! They were pals.

"Visit my home," begged Porter. "Do. Spent fifty thousand. Spanish style."

"I live in an apartment but you're all welcome any old time." Wilkins has a home, too.

They ascended from one atmosphere into another as if voyaging in upward passage through the realms of air. They had started from boredom and risen into overture, then into the successive atmospheres of smut, alcoholic thinking, hospitality. Now, the rarest stratosphere contained them, lucid, pseudo-intelligent, Philosophy.

The doctor told of strange cases, hallucinations.

Into what stratum had the rising balloons of their minds transported them?

And all the time, as equally immutable and stern to resolution's grandeur as Jehovah, the train hurtled forward with a huge wrenching, a huge harnessing of elemental strengths, like a god obedient to man and the wonder of man's mind even when mind

## EXCURSION INTO DIMENSION

was unhorsed to ride elsewhere. Faithful. Thus was God's Hand when He created in six days, flinging greenery on chaos.

"Ghosts?" said Wilkins. "In our factory a fellow was once crushed. He used to come back every noon when the whistles blew. Used to come back and watch the others leave for lunch."

Smith waved a skeptic's arrant hand. "No such thing." He didn't hear the train creating a ghost of time and distance, nor understand their passage was Alice in Wonderland, topsy-turvy-ing the land and sky into symbols.

"Don't tell me. I saw the man myself. A real ghost. Used to come at noon and watch the others beat it off for lunch. Just a shadow that watched."

"Maybe he was hungry?" said Porter. "Ghosts are hungry, sometimes. Remember the period when table tapping and ouija boards were the rage? That was the time when I spoke to a million if I spoke to one."

"There are such manifestations," the doctor murmured. The lids of his eyes were like those of a man in a trance. The solemnity of his breathing was awesome. "There are things and things."

They sat about in the train's catapult, drinking calmly in the hellish pace (in whose determination a core diabolical).

Don't they feel it? thought the student. Don't they feel the muscles of this beastly train? And where is it going? I'm sorry for them. For Smith enigmatic with simplicity, naïve and mysterious from a clear blue depth of mind. For the others lulled by movement into fantastic security, like children by the creaking of a cradle. Poor souls. Turmoil's a dream. Oh, God, I pity us! We are lost in the wilderness of our own bodies, lost in the thickets of our own flesh. Oh, human cages bounded by nose and mouth and skull and the outmost blue bars of veins! The train's entered my blood and I'm its seer. It sings of splendor and journeys to magic carpet lands, and actually it is carrying us to places like those from which we've come. My destination?

Because he was tired, time too was tired. There was no time but a tickless inertia through which he was whelming with a

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

speed that, negating itself, was a standing-still. The men were corpses beyond the hours. Lassitude was a growth within him. How cursedly tired he was!

Now, in an interval gluttoned with speed, Wilkins tottered upright and rolled down the corridor, mumbling good-night, and yet he didn't pass through the door (standing perplexed, his insolent face turning this way and that; Porter hollering, Oh, you drunken drunk). They glanced up and Wilkins was still there at the portal's edge, lurching to the dance of the train. He attempted to move. He couldn't. What sort of funny resistance was that? The door was open, wasn't it? He retreated. His paleness whispering a pale thing.

"Will one of you boys try to push through? I can't. Maybe I'm crazy, maybe I ain't?" And while they all laughed, the train seemed to laugh, too, a pounding chugging laugh. Porter went to the door, his face clowning around and always with a grin. He tried to step in emptiness. Emptiness was solid. Oh, my God, wasn't the door open? Yes. But it seemed as if there were another door, an invisible door of space, a resistance-antagonistic to his burly passage. He retreated.

"Something. Really. The two of us can't be drunk in exactly the same way."

The train was howling disaster. This had been a mortal second ago, but, straining, they listened to the wilder tumult of nothing. Nothing. Not one iron noise. Where are the trappings of sound? Soundless, they were naked and afraid. The five men confronted animal fear, two-legged and human. Slowly, tiptoeing forward, the doctor inched to the open door. Beyond he saw an incoherence, a substance similar to the night, dark, lustrous, unlighted, but a night that wheeled no train sound, roared no progress of polished steel on steel. He closed the door, sighed, flung it open as if it were a talisman. "For George and England"; brave cry; and also for my dirty hide. He stopped. He shuddered. He had not been able.

This was enough to stagger brains, to stagger hearts. "Three can't be drunk in exactly the same way," said Porter.

## EXCURSION INTO DIMENSION

No sound. No sound. Smith jerked up one of the windows. A slow rusty rasp. Sound. Oh, jubilee. But, but it had been an inside sound, within the coffin of the last car, buried as Porter's speech: "Three can't be . . ." They trembled, the four subtler men, while Smith's hand shot out like a fullback's. Muscle and shoulder hunched behind that thrust at the unknown. "My God!" yelled Wilkins. The fingers were flattened, groping faintly, just within the train. Smith grunted. It seemed as if he were pushing against another window. There was no other window.

Like men who suddenly recall a fugitive taste, feel lemon on tongue, or, in moundlike sleep know the hurricane, they were betrayed by a past that had been. Relaxing, they seemed in normal elsewhere. Seconds . . .

The doctor's eyes were sharp. "Take your hand away." Again they saw Smith's hand flat on What? What malevolence did his hand press? "Take it away, you fool. Most curious. We seem to have gotten into the inside of a vacuum." He gestured at them and tweaked his nose superbly.

"What's happened?" Wilkins thought the student a rag, Porter garbage, Smith an idiot. The coolish doc was the only hope.

Who knew? When the world of outside sound was soundless now in agonizing requiems? Last survivors on Atlantis, their voices sounded as if in a tunnel, sea-lost, sea-surrounded.

"We are hooked," Smith said. "We're hooked. Do you get that? Something's smashed us into this. I'll be damned if I know what." When men drift in a boat the silliest utterance is Delphic oracle.

The student, concentrating on courages hopping fences like dream sheep, strolled to where the last car had been bolted to the next. "We're unlooped from the train proper. We're riding to fate, down the incline of a hill. Maybe the hill's pointed up? You understand? Ever see a Western movie? The train set free by villains and going to doom? We're going to hell. Let's huddle together and die like rats."

The thumb, a squat horn. Wilkins' mouth curved; his teeth bit into the thumb with a deliberate attempt to test reality

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

through pain. "I feel it, boys, it hurts." They nodded, engrossed by the unique experience of vast amazement. What to do? Did one smile or gasp or howl? They stared at the widening of the doctor's eyes. So much whiteness, so much terror behind the flabby lids.

"This is a fix," declared Porter, "and I can't begin to think about it." Neither could the others.

They clustered together and thought, and thought again, that this was beyond humanity. How could the mind, functioned by journeyings from foot to airplane, conceive a progress outside earthly law? In the middle of the soundless dark, without—(surprising; but the electricity glimmered within as if fettered)—in the vortex of a new fury wildly sprung from an understandable speed, their minds attempted nothing, but the hazy marvel that so it should be. If all the farflung madness of adventure, all the terrestrial and marine perils had been opposed to them, they might have sheltered in fear. Fear was not for them. Nor any emotion. Positively, Wilkins'd have shrieked if surrounded by a nearing whirl of hot flame or, if Smith were struggling against the sea, he'd have fought before sinking. Porter would blubber before a gun, the doctor would have shrunk from leprosy, the student from a woman's bitter-sweet "Let's be friends." But none of this now! No danger to evoke the blessing of reaction. Give us danger, Lord.

Look! Porter and Wilkins dash down the aisle. The door swings. They cannot believe emptiness to be so solid. Are there not scientists? They push. They battle spectres solidified in blocks. The calm island of three observe. The doctor taps his brow as if annoyed by a terrible weight, a force of nothingness. "Yes, yes, we seem to be in a vacuum, we five." Porter and Wilkins rush by. The island feel their torso wind, are quiet, realizing that the two must return, for sheer strength cannot suffice among the miracles. They return.

Five men in a steel burial. Five men vanished from the earthly thrall. This is what had happened. This they knew. Somehow, somehow, this one car charged on stranger tracks.

## EXCURSION INTO DIMENSION

"The door's open," Porter cried, a child amazed at the sun. "Yet we can't put hand or foot through. No sound. None." His face was almost calm as if the alchemy of fear in his guts could not be distilled by this manifestation. One fears a brute, a lion, a death; yes, but to fear . . . ?

"It seems we've escaped into a new dimension, a new sphere, a new place." The doctor was in lecture-room.

"Perhaps we're in a dream, a dream perpetuated?" The student grinned. "Oo la la, 'dream no more, my lady' . . . Or 'is this eternity? And have we all died?'"

Wilkins gushed humanity. Oh, yes, pity the student, the poor kid. So young. Lovely youth, 'tis a pity thou must perish unbearded. "Ain't he a corker?"

"Corker or not, I feel that we can go on forever, to live forever, and aye, to live to live and never die for we are outside life and its deaths, maybe, inside life. It's wonderful. Don't you boys realize it? Good God, we're immortals."

Immortal? With speed unhooded to falcon across the world's great silence, wherein five lives were enwombed; yet in darkness, yet to seed forth into what sun, what paradise of life? what else could there be but the immortal waiting, the hush of something begun and beginning but not born?

The men and their barnacles of possession, bigotries, moods, recollections, wallets, coins, handkerchiefs, whatever was on their persons or in their minds must comprise the fived cosmos. For how many infinities must they shelter the futility of the repeated idea? The train was alone. Was it on steel? Was it on earth or in heaven "hallowed be thy name" . . . ? Must Wilkins again shove his hand against space? Must they again note the unseen resistance of its pressure? In a sighing, in a vasty contemplation like a swell of waters, they lazed into indolence, resigned; no use struggling, no use heaving the javelin lacking the enemy. When even God spurns to oppose His chest, why march in war? why struggle when the elements withhold the typhoon, the pyre, the bubbling waste? The doctor whispered, "It looks like eternity." He drank. "What'll happen when the booze gives

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

out, when we get hungry? Or, can we ever feel hungry in eternity? We have bodies, we're not ghosts, we may have our appetites lugged along." He jabbed a finger in his gut. "But we can't do anything."

Porter asked the concrete man for a snifter. These two weaklings had harbored in their haven, cowardice. The student lounged; song hits jangled in his brain.

Someone waved a fist. Someone was mad. It was Smith. "I've got two kids. One has blue eyes. The other's are brown just like mine."

"I've got a boy," said Porter. "A sturdy chap."

Who first had seen the torch, who first had glimpsed hope in blindness, who first had gladdened at the sparks?

"I've a daughter. Good God, please help us! Whatever Inscrutable there is, help us." The doctor snapped his gaunt jaw, "Out of it, you men. You cursed pack, out of it! Listen. We've entered this atmosphere. I don't know how, but not through physical endeavor. Out of it, you swinish dolts. Haha, I blaspheme like a pedant. Out of it! We must will ourselves out. Think. Think of the earth. Think of your lives. Will!"

They shuddered, eager. In this calm heart of chaos, the five thought, eagling their minds away on earthly missions. Oh, past lives that we've lived and, yet living, desire. Oh, past lives we will return, who cannot die, who will not die. We remember the shards of beauty who are fragments ourselves.

. . . Porter's boy. A rock of a boy, plump, golden, he runs across the lawn. A canopy of sunshine. Run, little boy, run. Mama's driving up in a sheen of enamel. Little boy cries Mama, Mama. Little boy hollers Mama, Mama. This is the house of my fathers and I can know no other home. Let me go back, groaned Porter. . . . Wilkins has a factory. He, the possessor, unhappy away from his serfs. Concrete. Chimneys are fingers of Baal. Wondrous fingers. Money. Nymph spawned out of concrete. Money and a son, another son. Sons are snippy. Their mother's dead and am I not her children's keeper? Dear wife, I promise to take care of your boys. Wilkins muttered, who can stop



## EXCURSION INTO DIMENSION

me? . . . Up and down strides Smith, long arms swinging; an Injun stride even if there isn't copper glow. Family, I have a family, family. Blood is surging from ancestors lost in streams and falls, blood is lake in me, blood is the new generations roaring beyond the mist. I've got a family and a damned beautiful squaw in Los Angeles, not blood but scented water. Family, one kid brown-eyed, the other blue-eyed. A man must try, Smith repeated endlessly. . . . And my daughter, morose daughter, who has bought her, who has bought her? I sent her out with a bigot shout. Who has bought her? Free me from rhyme, Lord, free me from singsong life. I must be on earth. My daughter's on earth, (and who has bought her?), there, I must be. Earth is hell. Hell is mine. The doctor seemed to be mumbling a prescription. . . . Home, mother, waves; the Pacific in a chariot race of white madcaps, mother, home, I am young, too young for this. Let me go home. . . .

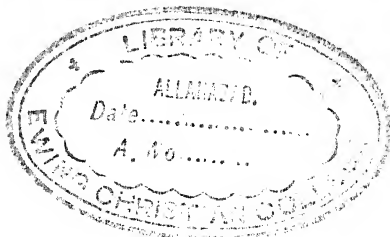
Each man flung off his thought from the doomed losing, like men thrusting their wives into boats when the ship drowns . . . earth images, children, homes in autumn gleam, sweethearts, parents, daffodils and hyacinths in April flower pots. Life, scent of buns baking, scent of hot sun and bees. Earth, beloved. The brine is salt, the cool underside shivers breaking froth. Life, I was a messenger for the leather people; and I a concrete salesman; and I a farmboy from the plains whose rape I contrive with machinery; and I a student; and I a youngling experiencing the mind's first torrent as I dissected. Merciful God, so many multitudes of earth things. Wild beginnings of boyhood; the textured youths of man. States of the Union linked by chewing-gum signs. . . .

. . . And in the mystic somehow of their craving, they suddenly looked at one another, leaned heads on palms, stared again and again, sighing, with the sad gaze of men who have been drinking together and who have unaccountably sobered. So they gazed, sitting there in the Pullman, five men sprawling and sipping highballs out of glasses. Almost, almost it had been done. The womb had opened and like five Lazaruses they came forth

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

from the place (yes, the place where immortals are unhappy), the place of the living dead. Out of that fright atmosphere, they conjectured on those brief-spanned creatures, the three dimensional ones, the earth folk. Have we escaped from the train's connotations? Are we free, unfettered from speed? Time and the world loom up out of the annihilations. We are men, and being men cannot be of the annihilated. Our years are banked by the annihilations of birth and death. But our years are glorious.

They got up, the five, and slowly, as if pondering a commonplace almost a fable—why shouldn't their car journey alone?—perceived the continuation of the Pullman into the next, into the next. Not glancing too much upon one another as if awed by the lives, god-like in their shrined bodies, thrilled by the religion whose psalms are sung in every cathedraled vein, they peered ahead into the next. Where people were talking, reading, playing cards. Shadow? Mist? Infinity? Rubbish. The next car was there. And as big as life. Again, helmeted in iron noise, one behind the other like men successively crossing an abyss, they entered therein, parting with scarcely a good-night like men who've experienced a shared miracle too terrible for discussion.



## The Fly\*

LUIGI PIRANDELLO

*Luigi Pirandello, the internationally famous Italian playwright and story writer, was born in Sicily in 1867, but left at the age of eighteen to study in Germany. He took his degree in literature and philosophy at the University of Bonn, and since then he has lived in Rome, where he has taught for twenty-five years in a girls' school. He has published numerous novels and volumes of short stories, but is better known for his plays, which are subtle and intricate studies in psychology. He received the Nobel Prize in 1934 for his writing.*

Two young men were climbing the steep, chalky ridge below the village. They used their hands as well as feet, because their hob-nailed boots kept slipping. They were out of breath from their hurry and, between gasps, cursed the slippery track. As soon as their purple faces appeared over the ridge, the crowd of women who were chattering round the little well at the entrance to the village, turned to look at them. Surely those were the Tortorici brothers? Yes, Neli and Saro Tortorici. Poor fellows! Why were they in such a desperate hurry?

Neli, the younger brother, felt unable to move another step and stopped to draw breath and reply to the women's questions; but Saro caught hold of his arm and dragged him on.

"It's our cousin—Giurlannu Zarul!" said Neli as he turned on his way. He raised his hand as if appealing to heaven.

\* From *The Naked Truth*, by Luigi Pirandello. E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1934. Reprinted by permission of E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

The women broke out into exclamations of sympathy and horror. One of them called after the brothers:

"Who did it?"

"No one. It was God!" cried Neli from a distance.

The youths hurried on to the house of the parish doctor, which stood in the village piazza.

Doctor Sodoro Lopiccolo was pacing up and down the living-room with his shirt unbuttoned, his sleeves rolled up, and a pair of old slippers on his feet. His eyes were bleared and puffy from lack of sleep, and on his flabby cheeks was a growth of beard of at least ten days. He carried in his arms a girl of about nine, all skin and bone and yellowed by disease.

His wife had been bed-ridden for the past eleven months. There were six children in the house, in addition to the one he had in his arms, who was the eldest. They were a wild brood of dirty, ragged little savages, and the house was in a terrible state of disorder—bits of crockery, fruit skins and heaps of filth on the floor, the chairs broken and the seats of the arm-chairs in holes, the beds not made for who could say how long, and the bed-clothes in tatters; for the boys amused themselves by pillow-fights in bed, the little rascals!

The one thing which had escaped the general ruin was a portrait hanging on the wall of what had once been the drawing-room. It was a photographic enlargement of Doctor Sodoro Lopiccolo, taken when he was a young man, shortly after he had got his diploma. In the portrait he looked spruce, even foppish, gay and smiling.

Dragging his slipshod feet, he walked over to this picture, shewed his teeth as he grinned amiably at it and held out his arms, presenting the sick girl to it.

"So there you are, Sisine," he said.

"Sisine" was the pet name his mother had called him by, if she wanted to tease him, in the far-off days when he had been her darling, the hope of the family, whose future was to be a glorious one.

## THE FLY

Sisinè, indeed!

He received the two peasants with the savagery of a mad dog.

"What do you want?"

Saro Tortorici, cap in hand, replied, still gasping for breath.

"Signor Doctor . . . a poor fellow—a cousin of ours—is at death's door."

"Lucky chap! Have the joy-bells rung!" shouted the doctor.

"Oh, no, your Honour. . . . He's dying. . . . He was taken ill all of a sudden. . . . We don't know what it is. He's at the Montelusa farm, lying in a stable."

The doctor drew back a step and broke out fiercely:

"At Montelusa! My God!"

It was, he knew, seven good miles by the road from his village—and what a road!

"Yes, your Honour. Come as quick as you possibly can, for pity's sake," Tortorici implored. "He's turned all black, like a piece of liver, and so swollen that it's frightening to look at him. *For pity's sake, come!*"

"What! On Foot?" yelled the doctor. "Ten miles on foot? You're mad. A mule—I want a mule, d'you hear? Have you got a mule?"

"I'll run and get one at once," Tortorici hastened to answer. "I'll get one lent me."

"Meanwhile," said Neli, the younger brother, "I'll be off and get a quick shave."

The doctor gave him a look as if he wanted to devour him.

"It's Sunday to-day, sir," said Neli in excuse, and smiled with some embarrassment. "I'm engaged to be married, you see, sir. . . ."

"Oh! So you're going to get married, are you?" sneered the doctor, beside himself with rage. "Here, take this child then."

With these words, he thrust the sick girl into the young man's arms, then seized one by one the other children who were crowding round and pushed them violently towards him, crying, "and this one," "and this one," "and this one," "and this one. . . ." "Damned fool!" he concluded, "you damned fool. . . ."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

He turned and made as if he were going away, then came back, took the sick girl again in his arms and shouted to the two brothers:

"Be off with you! Get a mule and I'll come at once."

Neli Tortorici was all smiles again as he went down the staircase, following his brother. He was twenty years old, and Aluzza, his fiancée, was sixteen and very beautiful. Seven children? That wasn't enough—he wanted a dozen! It is true that he had no means of providing for them other than the strong pair of arms which God had given him, but he was ready to undertake anything with unflinching cheerfulness. His two delights were to wield the scythe and to sing; people called him Liolà (the poet) because of his habit of improvising songs while he worked. He knew that he was a general favourite, on account of his very obliging disposition and unflinching good humour, and he bestowed a smile even on the air he breathed. The sun had not yet succeeded in tanning his skin or dulling his bright, curly hair, which was a rich gold and the envy of the women. How many women blushed in confusion when he looked at them—in a certain way—with those sparkling blue eyes of his!

He was horribly upset over his cousin Zaru's illness, and even more concerned over the fact that his Luzza would undoubtedly be very cross with him—for had she not been longing for six days past for Sunday to arrive, so that she could be with him for at least a few hours. But how could he, in all conscience, get out of performing an act of Christian charity? Poor Giurlannu Zaru! He too was engaged to be married—and now this blow had fallen on him with terrible suddenness. He had been at work, beating the almond trees, down on Lopes' farm at Montelusa. The morning before—that was Saturday—the weather had changed and threatened to break up, though it did not look as if there were any danger of immediate rain. Towards midday, however, Lopes had declared:

"In an hour's time, my lads, God will be letting loose his rain on us. I don't want my almonds left lying on the wet ground, so you must stop your beating."

## THE FLY

He ordered the women who gathered the fruit to go to the shed up on the hillside and start the husking. "As for you," he said, turning to the men who had been beating—among them were Neli and Saro Tortorici—"you can go along too, if you like—go with the women, and do the husking."

Giurlannu Zaru replied: "I'll do it, but you'll have to pay me my usual wages of twenty-five soldi a day."

"No, only for half the day," replied Lopes. "For the other half you'll be paid at the half-lira rate, the same as the women."

It was high-handed injustice! There was no reason why the men should not continue to do a man's job and draw their usual wages for the whole day. It did not rain; as a matter of fact no rain fell all that day or even during the night.

"You offer me wages at half a lira a day?" cried Giurlannu Zaru. "Well, I refuse! I wear breeches—not a skirt! No, you pay me for my half-day's work at the rate of twenty-five soldi and I'm off."

He did not go, however, but stayed on until evening, waiting for his two cousins who had agreed to work at the husking, together with the women, at the half-lira wage. After a time, tired of standing about waiting and looking on, he wandered off to a stable near by and threw himself down to sleep. He had asked the others to wake him when the time came for leaving.

They had beaten the almond trees for only a day and half, and the crop collected was scanty. So the women proposed to husk them all, working till late in the evening, staying on to sleep there the rest of the night, and rising before daybreak to start back to the village. This was agreed to and Lopes sent for a dish of beans and a couple of flagons of wine. At midnight, when the husking was finished, all of them, men and women, lay down to sleep in the open, on the threshing floor where the straw was wet with dew as if it really had rained.

"Liola, sing to us," they cried.

And Neli began improvising songs. The moon went in and out among a confused mass of clouds, now white, now black, and the moon was the face of his Luzza, who smiled upon him

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

or at times looked dark, according to the alternating joy and sadness of their love.

Giurlannu Zaru had remained in the stable. Before dawn, Saro had gone to awaken him, and found him all swollen and black, in a very high fever.

Neli Tortorici related the whole story in the barber's shop. At one point in his tale, the barber grew so excited that he cut him on the chin. It was only a trifling wound, nothing at all to bother about, and Neli had not even the time to complain at the man's clumsiness, for at that moment Luzza appeared in the doorway, accompanied by her mother and Mita Lumia, the unfortunate fiancée of Giurlannu Zaru, who was weeping and groaning with despair.

Neli had the greatest difficulty in persuading the poor girl to abandon her idea of going at once, all the way down to Montelusa to see her lover. He promised that she would see him before evening, as soon as they had brought him up—they would manage to carry him somehow. At that moment Saro hurried in, shouting that the doctor had already mounted the mule, and wouldn't wait a moment longer. Neli took Luzza aside and begged her to wait patiently for his return; he would be back before nightfall, and had so many lovely things to say to her. . . .

It was an atrocious road. Doctor Lopiccolo saw death very near to him on the edge of some of the dizzy precipices, even though Saro on one side and Neli on the other were holding the mule by the halter. Below lay the vast Campagna with its plateaux and valleys, cornfields and orchards of olive and almond trees; the stubble shewed up yellow, with here and there black patches from the heaps of refuse burnt for manure. In the far distance they could make out the sea, of a harsh blue colour. The mulberries, locust trees, cypresses and olives kept their different shades of perennial green, but the tops of the almond trees had already begun to thin.

All around them, to the distant circle of the horizon were great mountains of wind-blown cloud, but, despite the breezes, the heat



## THE FLY

was overpowering and the stones were cracking in the sunshine. Occasionally, from the other side of the dusty cactus hedges, there came the clear note of a lark or the chuckle of a jay. At the noise, the animal pricked up his ears in alarm.

"A bad mule! A bad mule!" the doctor ejaculated with a groan.

He sat with his eyes fixed intently on the mule's head and did not even notice the glare from the sun as his old green-lined umbrella slipped further and further back over his shoulder.

"Your Honour need have no fear. We are here," said the Tortorici brothers to encourage him.

Indeed the doctor would not have been so frightened for himself—but his thoughts were on his children. He must keep himself safe for the sake of those helpless little wretches.

The Tortorici brothers began to talk to distract him. They spoke of the harvest: how the wheat was short, the beans were short; as for the almond trees, every one knew how badly they had done—they only bore good fruit every other year. And the olives! Don't speak of them—they had never filled out properly, for the mist had stunted them early in the year. And there was no hope of the farmers making up their losses by the grape harvest, since all the vineyards in the district were attacked by disease. . . .

"A cheerful prospect!" the doctor repeated from time to time with a shake of the head.

After two hours' march, they had exhausted all their topics of conversation. The road now ran straight for a long distance and was covered with a thick layer of whitish dust. The pattering of the mule's hoofs mingled with the tread of the peasants in their hob-nailed boots. Liolà began to sing softly to himself, involuntarily—but he soon stopped. There was not a living soul to be seen. It was Sunday and all the peasants had remained in the village above, some to go to Mass, others to do their shopping or amuse themselves. Perhaps down there, at Montelusa, no one had stayed with Giurlannu Zaru. If he was still alive, he had been left to die alone. . . .

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

They found him, in fact, all alone in the filthy stable, lying beside the wall, just as Saro and Neli had left him. Livid and enormous, his face was no longer recognisable. He was breathing stertorously. The sun came through the barred window by the hayrack and shone on to a face that seemed no longer human. The nose had disappeared altogether, lost among the swollen features; the lips were black and horribly puffy. From between those lips, his breath came in gasps that sounded like an angry snarl. A bit of straw caught in his curly black hair gleamed in the sunshine.

The three men stood in the entrance, staring at him for some moments. Their horror seemed to hold them back. The mule snorted and stamped upon the cobbled floor of the stable. Then Saro Tortorici went across to the dying man and began to talk affectionately to him.

"Giurlà! Giurlà! Here's the doctor. Look!"

Neli went to tie the mule to the hayrack. There seemed to be the shadow of another animal on the wall—the outline of the donkey who was usually stabled there, and spent all day rubbing himself against the whitewash.

When a second attempt was made to rouse Giurlannu Zaru, he stopped panting, and managed to open his eyes. They shewed bloodshot, surrounded by dark circles and full of fear. He opened his horrible mouth, and groaned in a voice which seemed to expire in his throat:

"I'm . . . dying. . . ."

"No, no," Saro hastened to reply, in a grief-stricken tone. "Here's the doctor come to see you. We've brought him down to you. Can you see him?"

"Take me . . . to the village. . . ." the dying man implored. "Oh, *Mamma mia*. . . ." He gasped the words with the greatest difficulty, unable to bring his lips together.

"Why, I'd carry you up there in my arms, Giurlà," said Neli, hastening to his side and bending over him. "Don't lose heart—you'll be all right."

At the sound of Neli's voice, Giurlannu Zaru slowly turned

## THE FLY

and fixed his bloodshot eyes upon him. He seemed not to recognise him at first; then he stretched out his hand and took hold of the red silk sash round his cousin's waist.

"Hullo. . . . Is that you, old man?"

"Yes, it's me all right. It's Neli. Cheer up. Don't cry, Giurlà, don't cry. . . . There's nothing much the matter with you."

He placed his hand upon the chest of the sick man which was heaving convulsively with sobs that were unable to reach his throat. After a few moments, choked by his efforts, Zaru shook his head angrily, then reached out with one hand, caught hold of Neli by the neck and pulled him down to him.

"We were to have been married—together . . ." he said.

"Yes, and we *shall* get married together—don't you have any doubt about that," replied Neli, unfastening the hand which clutched at his neck.

Meanwhile the doctor was studying the dying man. It was quite clear to him—a case of glanders.

"Just tell me," he said, "do you remember having been bitten by some insect?"

Zaru shook his head.

"Insect?" asked Saro.

The doctor explained things, as best he could, to the two ignorant peasants. Some animal, he said, must have died of glanders near by and the carcass had probably been thrown into a pit where countless flies would have settled on it. Then one of the flies had flown to that stable and infected Zaru with the disease.

While the doctor was giving his explanation, Zaru turned his face to the wall. Though none of them was aware of it, the instrument of death was there all the time—still there and so small that it could hardly be noticed. It was a fly on the wall close by. It seemed to be quite still, but if one looked closely at it one could see that sometimes it stretched out its little proboscis and sucked, whilst at others it rapidly cleaned its two slender fore-legs, rubbing them together with apparent satisfaction.

The doctor was still speaking when Zaru caught sight of it. He fixed his eyes upon it.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

A fly. . . . That might be the very one, or it might be another—who could say? For now, after hearing the doctor's words, he seemed to remember that on the previous day, when he had lain down there to sleep, waiting for his cousins to finish husking Lopes' almonds, a fly *had* worried him. . . . Could that by any chance be the one?

All at once he saw it fly away. He turned to follow it with his eyes.

Ah! It had alighted on Neli's cheek. From the cheek, it very quietly shifted with a couple of quick movements to the chin and settled down to feed voraciously on the cut made by the barber's razor.

Giurlannu Zaru stared intently up at it, lost in thought. Then he spoke in a sepulchral tone, uttering the words with the greatest difficulty.

"A fly? . . . Could a fly have done it . . . ?"

"Yes, why not a fly?" answered the doctor.

Giurlannu Zaru said no more but continued to watch the fly, which Neli made no effort to drive away, entirely absorbed as he was by the doctor's words. Zaru no longer listened. He was very glad that the doctor continued to talk and by so doing retained the full attention of his cousin Neli, so that he stood motionless as a statue and paid no heed at all to the fly on his face. Ah! *now they would really get married together.* . . . A grim jealousy, a dull envy had come upon him at the sight of his young cousin, so healthy, so full of the promise of life—life from which he himself was to be suddenly cut off.

A time came when Neli at last felt something biting him. He raised his hand and drove the fly away; then began to press his chin on the place where it had been cut. He turned to Zaru and found him staring at him. He was a little disconcerted to see that the sick man's ghastly lips were wrinkled in a monstrous smile. They gazed at one another for a space; then, almost without meaning to, Zaru said:

"The fly . . ."

Neli did not understand. He bent over his cousin.

## THE FLY

"What d'you say?"

"The fly . . ." repeated Zaru.

"Which? Where?" asked Neli, in alarm, looking at the doctor.

"There . . . where you're rubbing yourself. . . . I'm sure—I'm sure it's the same fly," said Zaru, and giggled horribly.

Neli showed the doctor the cut on his chin.

"What's the matter with it? It's smarting. . . ."

The doctor studied the spot and looked concerned. Then, as if in order to examine it better, he led him outside the stable. Saro followed them.

What happened then? Giurlannu Zaru never discovered, though he waited, waited for an interminable time in a state of anxiety that convulsed his whole being. Indistinctly he could hear voices outside. Suddenly Saro hurried back into the stable and, without even turning to look at him, unfastened the mule and rushed away again, groaning all the time, "Oh, God! My Neli . . . my poor little Neli. . . ."

So it was true! And they had left him there alone to die like a dog. He managed to raise himself up on his elbow and called twice:

"Saro . . . Saro . . ."

Silence. There was no one there.

He could not support himself on his elbow any longer and collapsed back on the floor. For some time he buried his face in the straw bedding, so that he would not notice how silent the country-side had become—a terrifying silence. Suddenly a doubt arose in his mind whether the whole affair could not have been a nightmare—the result of his attack of fever. But when he turned again to the wall, he saw the fly, back in the same spot.

There it was . . . that was real enough.

Sometimes it stretched out its little proboscis and sucked, whilst at others it rapidly cleaned its two slender forelegs, rubbing them together with apparent satisfaction.

## Prelude to Love\*

OGDEN W. HEATH

*Although Ogden Heath has long been confined to his room because of illness, his imagination ranges far. His rare spirit is remarkable for its courage, sensitiveness, and wisdom. Although his two stories reprinted here, Prelude to Love and The Pearl, appeared separately in The Atlantic Monthly, they are parts of the same story, intended by the author to form a unit, and so they should be read together.*

### I

THE corridor seemed strangely quiet. The usual evening bustle and clatter of voices and footsteps, of nurses and internes hurrying by, of visitors coming and going or walking slowly beside some convalescent patient, all were hushed. There were long intervals during which no one passed at all.

But Neal, lying in his narrow bed, continued to stare hopefully toward the open doorway. Each time his keen invalid's ears caught the sound of an approaching step his heart jumped. But each time he knew deep within him that it was not Gay. He would know her step instantly among a million. A clock began striking the hour. Its loudness startled him at first because he knew it was several blocks away. Mechanically he counted eight strokes. She won't come now, he thought, especially with all this snow.

The overheated hospital atmosphere became suddenly so oppressive to him that he felt nearly suffocated. He looked toward the window. It was wide open, yet no breath of air reached him.

\* From *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1933. Reprinted by permission of the author and the publishers.

## PRELUDE TO LOVE

He stared at the large flakes falling steadily out there, to glisten for a moment like moths as they passed through a beam of light, and then vanish into the night. Even the sea sound of the city was miraculously hushed to a murmur, so that he imagined he could hear the whisper of the flakes. But for once they brought him no comfort.

Why hadn't Gay come this afternoon as she promised? She must know how much it would mean to me this last day, he thought. But what does she care? I can't take her out and give her a good time like the others. No, that's not fair; she's proved often enough that she does care—a little, anyway. But I wouldn't blame her if she didn't. What can I offer her? Nothing . . . but myself—helpless, no good to anyone. But after the operation I shan't be so helpless . . . if it's a success. But it must be, it must be. . . .

The door of Mrs. Daley's room across the way opened a little. There was a loud blare from the radio inside. "Since my sweetie went away . . . Wah, wah-wah, wah-wah . . ." The intricate harmonizings of a male quartette filled the corridor. Neal winced for the man in the next room. He would not last through the night, they had said. She might turn the damnable thing off for a few hours at least. The door was shut suddenly and the noise ceased. Does *he* know he is dying? What kind of thoughts does a dying person have? Neal found himself listening for something. Yes, there it was still, that curious little sound which had come to him at quiet moments during the day from the other side of the wall and which had so puzzled him until it had finally struck him that it could be but one thing—hiccoughs. Perhaps he too was lying in there now staring at the snow and trying unsuccessfully to lose himself. . . .

Listlessly Neal turned from the window to glance at the book on the small table beside the bed. At last he picked it up, and opening to his place, which was marked by a letter from Gay, he began to read. He had reached the bottom of the page before he realized that nothing of its sense had penetrated to his consciousness. Instead of Proust's meandering sentences he saw Gay

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

rocking back and forth and singing to herself, as blithely unself-conscious as a child:

"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way!

Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh! . . ."

As the words kept running through his head he let the book fall on his chest, and, turning again to the window, gave himself up to the memories that rose in rapid succession: the way she stood that day at the beach with the sun on her face and squinted up at him with the funny little smile curling up out of one corner of her mouth . . . the sound of her laughter, a low, husky, deprecating gurgle when he teased her, and the impudent wrinkling of her snub nose and toss of her head, with a flapping of her short hair round her ears . . . her trick of staying till the last moment and then going off with a single brief waggle of her fingers, and leaving behind in her hurry her gloves, purse, handkerchief. . . . Neal heard himself laughing. I'll ask her next time she comes, he thought. What will she say? How will she look? He recalled how she would sometimes sink into a long silence in the midst of a conversation, and how, with a slow, absorbed, dreamy stare, she would turn to him when he sought, though always in vain, to enter that fathomless world of her silence, and he marveled anew at her rare capacity for yielding herself wholly to each present moment. . . .

### II

A light tapping at the door broke in upon his reverie. He looked and saw a familiar silhouette standing framed just within the doorway. "It's me," it said, incredibly bringing his dream to life. Something in him leaped with sudden eagerness to meet the slight figure as it came slowly into the room to stop close by the bed.

"You *did* come," he heard himself say, still only half convinced of her presence. Her snow-wet cheeks glistened, and her eyes were dancing gloriously. Gratefully he breathed in the smell of



## PRELUDE TO LOVE

the fur and the snow. For a long moment they just stared, all their sensibilities opened wide to the magical flow that was passing back and forth between them. "In all this snow, too." Leisurely she took off her coat and threw it over the back of a chair. She moved in an aura of delicious, fragrant coolness, the fresh fragrance of outdoors.

"Don't you love the snow? I wanted to stay out and walk and feel it on my face."

"I've been lying here wishing I could do just that."

"So fluffy and soft . . . I wanted to lie down and roll in it as I did when I was small, and make snowballs and throw them at people—only I was afraid they might think I was queer. . . . Are you laughing at me?"

"Certainly not. Go on. Please talk more."

"If it had been anyone else I wouldn't have come in at all."

"Too bad you did. I was having such a good time here all by myself."

"I did walk round the block once. And I'm only going to stay a minute." She pulled off her gloves and laid them beside the purse on the bureau. "Then I'm going out to walk some more."

"Good," he grinned.

She wrinkled her nose and gave his arm a little push. "Pig."

They burst out laughing together. And his delight in her grew beyond all measuring as he recognized the low gurgle he had been hearing in imagination such a short time before. Should he ask her now?

"I'm so glad I know you," he said. "You do play so nice."

She went to get her handkerchief from her purse and made several little dabs at her nose. "Have I got a red nose?"

"A little. Why, have you got a cold?"

"It's nothing. Just a sniffle. Mamma didn't want me to go out to-night. But I told you I'd come, so I came anyway."

"But suppose it makes your cold worse. Maybe you shouldn't have."

"What a nice bouquet!" She bent to smell the roses in the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

small vase on the table. "Sweetheart roses. I should have brought you some flowers."

"Is that what they are called? That makes it even more romantic. They were sent to me by a girl down the corridor."

Gay made a face at him, and, taking the vase, set it down on the floor out of sight. Her playful pretense of jealousy enchanted Neal.

"I haven't even seen her yet, but we're old friends already. This morning after breakfast her nurse brought me a note from her. I sent back an answer and we've been exchanging notes all day, each one more friendly, till the last one, a little while ago when she sent me the flowers, sounded as if we had known each other for years. She's had her appendix out and expects to get up in a day or so. They say she's very pretty; all the internes are crazy about her."

As he paused she lifted the vase back to its place on the table and began rearranging the flowers with what struck him as rather too elaborate carefulness. "Can you see them all right?" she said. Then she went and sat in the chair in the farthest corner of the room.

"Don't sit way over there. Come here and sit on the bed."

But she stayed still where she was. The flowers stood directly in his line of vision, so he could not see her face. He became conscious of a vague disappointment growing at the back of his mind, and of regret for something in his dream which was missing now in the reality of her actual presence. What's the matter with me? he thought. Just a few minutes ago I was longing to see her, and now she's here the thrill is gone already. Feeling somehow guilty, he tried to push his disappointment away. "Well, then, move the flowers," he said; "I can't see you." But why was it, when he was alone it always seemed so easy, and then as soon as they were together something got between them?

"What difference does it make?" she said.

She was only pretending, of course. But that cold curtness beneath the surface lightness of her tone? This was carrying the game a bit too far. Another blare of the radio drew his attention.

## PRELUDE TO LOVE

He looked in time to see the back of a man going into Mrs. Daley's room. The door closed behind him. A shrill feminine voice sounded faintly from inside. Neal grasped eagerly at the diversion. He forced a laugh. "She's on a rampage to-night. That's her husband who just went in. Usually he's here by seven, but he's over an hour late to-night. She's so jealous she calls him up at all hours to make sure he's where he tells her he's going to be."

"How do you know all that?"

Yes, there was an unmistakable note of constraint in her voice. Neal went on hurriedly, saying whatever first came into his head. And all the while he was painfully aware of the swift fading of that precious thing which had just been there flowing between them.

I must hear her laugh again, he thought. "Why, you can't help but hear, she hollers so loud. Besides, everyone knows all about everyone else in a hospital. Everybody gossips when they're not too busy boasting about their doctors or their own ailments. It's funny, but there's something in the air that makes people let down the bars and throw off most of the conventional restraints that rule them outside. For most people, after the first short period of pain is past, it's just one grand holiday. Nothing to do all day but talk and eat, and talk some more. Everyone seems so much more sex-conscious, too. The most sedate females get out their thinnest and fanciest negligees—much too fancy to waste on a mere husband at home—and parade up and down before total strangers, or else sit up in bed and flirt brazenly with people they wouldn't be seen with on the street. Even the worst grouches and snobs become quite amiable. I suppose the enforced idleness, together with the unfamiliar nearness of death . . ." Overcome all at once by a sense of the hollowness of his words and hopelessly scattered by her continued aloofness, he let his sentence dribble away unfinished into the silence. His mind was drained dry.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

### III

Suddenly she got up, pulled the chair close to the bed, and sat down again, settling back into its depths with her body curled sideways. He looked at her curiously and she smiled, a strange, intimate, lazy smile which reassured him and filled him with gratitude. She crossed her legs and began absently twirling round her forefinger a curl at the back of her head. A shock of wonder passed through him as he stared at the slowly bobbing tip of her shoe. To be able to stand up and sit down, to cross one's legs and to lie back at ease in a chair, all so easily, without a single conscious effort of will! And shall I be able to do all that too after the operation? he thought incredulously.

"What are you thinking of?"

Her voice came to him from far away. But how could he tell her, who lived in a world in which to be able to do these things was not a miracle, in which the body could be taken for granted? How make her understand?

She leaned forward abruptly to stare at him intently. "Are you nervous about the operation, Neal?"

"No, I'm looking forward to it."

Their eyes met for a long moment.

"Oh, Neal," she murmured in a naked voice which revealed her secret hopes and fears more clearly than any words.

I'll ask her now. This was the moment. To hear her say "Yes," to feel her close—something to hold on to when they covered his face with that mask to-morrow. It *must* be a success.

With a little impulsive gesture she reached out and touched his hand with the tips of her fingers. "Say it, Neal. What is it you were going to say?"

She knows. No need to ask her. You're adorable, he was saying inwardly; you have the loveliest eyes I ever looked into. But that would sound too much like a line. . . . He wanted to shout, to sing, to laugh long and loud, to describe to her in detail all that was happening inside him. But why couldn't he?

"Please. Tell me what you were going to say then."

## PRELUDE TO LOVE

Well, and why not? Surely it will be a success. But suppose it wasn't. He could not bear to see this light go out of her eyes little by little, and know he was becoming a burden to her, unwanted. . . . "Here comes Mrs. Daley's husband out again. You can get a good look at him." Why did I say that?

"Oh, forget Mrs. Daley and her husband! You *must* tell me, Neal."

"He generally spends more time with the nurse at the desk than with his wife. Did you notice her when you came in? She's a dizzy thing."

The light faded from her eyes. She sat back in her chair again. "I don't wonder his wife bawls him out all the time. I wouldn't trust him out of my sight two minutes. But that's just like a man. They're all the same—they fall for any dizzy thing who takes the trouble to flatter their vanity. When you get up you'll do it too, I suppose."

The brittle flippancy of her words bewildered him. "Why do you say that? It's because of what I told you about that girl."

"Oh, I wouldn't blame you, no matter what you did. You certainly deserve a good time after all this."

"But that isn't my idea of a good time. Promiscuous friendships don't interest me."

"That's what you say now. But just wait. It's only human nature. After all, you're no different from other men."

His vanity reared at the direct challenge to his deeply cherished sense of individuality. "You're a very wise young lady, aren't you?" he began. Then, after a moment, "But surely you don't think I take her seriously, or she me?"

"How do I know? You might. But I don't see how men can be so simple as to be taken in by such tricks."

This was too ridiculous. Sounds of life flowing in the street below, the irritable snarl of an automobile horn, the clanging of a street-car bell, the shrill of a policeman's whistle, cut across the heavy silence to penetrate the outer precincts of his consciousness. "Aren't you being rather hard on someone you've never even

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

seen?" he said at last. "There are the notes over there. Read them if you like. You talk as if you thought . . ."

"I'm not at all interested in hearing about your affairs with other women."

Stinging, bitter words rushed to his lips, but he checked them. Slow, he thought; be careful what you say now or you may break something that can't be repaired again. But deep down he knew that something was already irreparably broken. So she was like this, too. Then this lovely image which had been taking shape in him all this long while was, after all, only an illusion fashioned out of his own longings. Certainly this was not the Gay of the swift sympathies and wide tolerance he thought he knew so well.

### IV

They stared at each other as strangers. Her eyes and lips were smiling, but it was a smile he had never seen before on her face, a surface smile, faintly mocking and alert to parry and thrust. Within the lonely, innermost, elusive core of him he recoiled from her. Finally he gave a short, hard laugh and looked away toward the door. Presently Mr. Tomkins came shuffling along in his faded brown bathrobe. He smiled and waved. Neal responded mechanically. Mr. Tomkins hesitated as if about to come in, then went on. Neal heard the scrape of a chair and out of the corner of his eye saw Gay go to the bureau. But he would not let himself turn to her. Stubbornly he shut himself off from her, assuring himself he didn't care what she did. Then he heard the click of the catch on her purse. There was a sharp finality to the sound that made him go tight all over. Could she be going, really going? In a flash he saw what a vast aching emptiness her going would leave in him.

"That wasn't fair, Gay, and you know it," he said quietly.

She lifted her head defiantly. "Well, maybe it wasn't. But a person who is really in love has eyes for nobody but the one he loves. He just isn't interested in anyone else."

"That sounds very nice and romantic, but it just isn't so. A

## PRELUDE TO LOVE

man in love is even more susceptible, in some ways, than one who isn't."

"I don't believe it."

"Nevertheless it's a fact. Besides, no one person can be all in all to another, no matter how much the two may be in love. People are too complex."

She shook her head emphatically. "A person who is really in love simply can't see anyone but the one he loves."

"That's your opinion. But it's mine that a man can have a genuine love for two or even more women at the same time." She was staring at him in a way which puzzled and disturbed him. "But of course it all comes down to what you mean by love. There are so many different kinds . . . Oh, I can't explain what I mean. . . ."

Gay walked slowly over to stand near the foot of the bed. Little by little his thoughts began to clear. He spoke slowly, and in his self-absorbed search for just the right word his awareness of her began to fade again. "But there's always something more in us that's left over, something that can only be satisfied by some other person or maybe several persons. Perhaps for a time, while the first glow of love is on you . . . But that's bound to wear off sooner or later."

"I know love can't last forever," Gay interrupted. "But when it came to an end I would go away."

Good, he thought, she's sensible again. Lulled by her words into a relaxed complacency, he began to strut. "Life never stands still. Life is growth and decay, a perpetual ebb and flow of desire . . ." But the shell of his complacency was shattered in an instant when, looking up, he saw that her eyes were misty. He floundered, groping ineffectually to free himself from the web of words. "Oh, why are we wasting our time like this? Why do we go on looking solemn and pretending we're interested in all these pompous generalities? All generalities are false." Yes, even this one, he added inwardly.

With an aching acuteness he watched the precious minutes

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

sliding by swiftly and irretrievably into eternity. Soon Miss Wiggen would be coming to say it was time to go. But wasn't there some way, some word that would make her understand? "It's an insatiable curiosity, a . . . a sense of mystery. . . . But these are only words. You have to *feel* it. Oh, how can so many people go through life and not feel the mystery of things?" Her chin went up again. Worse and worse. He was only getting in deeper all the time. "Don't misunderstand me. Please, Gay . . ."

"I don't. I know what you mean, all right. Better than you do yourself, I think."

"Do you ever have the feeling, when you're talking to someone, trying to get across to him and make him understand something that means a lot to you, that the other person doesn't understand at all and never will, no matter how long you talk? Have you ever felt the treachery, the utter inadequacy of words—the futility of even trying to express what you mean in words that must in the very nature of things mean something different to everyone? What do you mean by the word 'love,' for instance? I doubt if you could tell me. I know I couldn't tell you what I mean. After all, it's merely a convenient symbol we use to sum up all the thousands of little emotional experiences of a certain sort that have chanced to come to us from the day we were born. So even for ourselves its meaning changes almost every time we use it. It's so easy to misunderstand even the simplest things; even things said with the kindest intentions in the world have a way of hurting some one without our knowing anything about it."

"Do you know, I think you're not very frank."

Exasperated, Neal flung out in hot arrogance, "Who ever said I was? Of course I'm not frank, if by being frank you mean blurting out whatever you think, regardless of everyone. A person who is always frank is either a barbarian or a fool. What we need in this world is less frankness and more hypocrisy." There you go, showing off again, protested an inner voice. You know you don't mean that. Well, but in a way I do.



## PRELUDE TO LOVE

"Then I'm either a barbarian or a fool. I can't pretend. And I won't try."

All at once Neal felt very tired and heavy with defeat. It's no good—I can't reach her. Better not to talk at all; words only drive it away. But must it be so always? He said, "Sometimes I'm tempted to close up tight and not even try to meet people except on the surface. The trouble is, you're all feeling—and I'm top-heavy on the mental side, I guess. Here we are talking to each other in different languages and getting nowhere. . . . Oh, what's the use?"

"If that's the way you feel, I think it's too bad."

They stayed silent for some time, avoiding each other's eyes.

"We *are* very different," she said at last. "It really is silly for us to go on; we never seem to understand each other." She paused. He knew she was waiting for him to deny it. But he found it impossible to say a word. "I guess I might as well go now."

If she goes now, it's the end, he told himself. He stared at her curiously, with a cold detachment. There was a hurt look in her eyes and an odd, set expression round her mouth. She dropped her eyes before his pitiless gaze. Do you know you're not at all pretty like that?

Suddenly she was over by the bureau, standing with her back to him, her head bent forward.

Damn! She was crying. Had he really said that, or did he just imagine he said it? He stared at her back while she cried silently, his only feeling a rather shocked astonishment at his indifference. The far-off muffled moan of foghorns on the river came drifting forlornly through the falling snow to mingle with the gloom in his soul. We're lost in a fog too, he thought. But she's right. It *was* silly to hope they could ever meet in any lasting understanding. Why not let it end now before they got in any deeper?

v

"Excuse me," broke in a voice from the doorway. It was Miss Wiggen. "I'll just close this for a minute."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Why? . . ."

But the door was already shut and they were alone again. Then suddenly he knew.

"The man next door must have died," he said, "and they're going to take him out now. She's very professional. She doesn't want me to know for fear it will upset me." His voice somehow did not sound as unconcerned as he had hoped.

Gay turned about to stare at him, her eyes big with awe. The sight of her tears melted Neal in an instant. He stretched out a hand.

"Come here, Gay," he said in a strange, peremptory voice, straining toward her with all the strength of his being. There was an intolerable ache in his throat. He felt as if he were going to choke. He felt he could not bear to see her like that another second. What torture to be unable to get up and go to her!

She came and stood just beyond his reach, her hands clasped over her breast. Then abruptly she took his hand and held it between both of hers. "Does it upset you, Neal?"

"No. But it gives me a queer feeling." They stared at each other, listening. She feels it too, he thought. Vague noises came to them from the next room—people talking, feet and chairs scuffling. But no longer that sound of hiccoughing. When had that ceased? While they were arguing, absorbed in their petty quarrel, a man had died on the other side of that wall. Something had left that body in there which just a few minutes ago had been a human being, like her and himself, and gone—where? Perhaps it had passed between them as they wrangled. The chimes came booming through the night. A sound of laughter reached them through the wall.

"I don't see how they can be so callous," said Gay in a hushed, indignant voice.

"They see so much of it, the mystery doesn't touch them."

She came then of her own accord and sat on the edge of the

## PRELUDE TO LOVE

bed, still holding his hand between hers. The light shone on her face and hair, and her crystal beads sparkled iridescently. In the back of his consciousness he noted the shape and color of their shadows on her throat. Each shadow had a small hole of light in it which it puzzled him for a moment to account for. The gleaming ivory-pink smoothness of her skin, so soft, so firm. . . . The pulse throbbing at the lower edge of the shadow caught his eye. At sight of that mysterious token of the life force coursing in her veins it came to him with a shock how completely his happiness was bound up in this fragile flesh, and he shuddered. . . . That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once. . . .

Gay disengaged one of her hands. She smiled dimly as their eyes met.

"Forgive me, Gay. I'm a stupid pig. Kick me, will you?"

She lifted his hand and brushed the back of it lightly with her lips. Her eyes glowed with a tenderness such as Neal had never seen before.

"Sometimes you make me feel so old," she said. "You're such a baby, Neal."

And Neal became aware of something utterly new welling up within him, like a spring in a desert, to moisten with its fertile flow the arid sands of his soul.

"I guess maybe you're right," he said.

## The Pearl\*

OGDEN W. HEATH

### I

“AND how are you this fine spring day?” said a voice from the doorway.

Neal shut the book reluctantly. This was the first time since the operation six days ago that he had felt strong enough to read. But when he saw who it was he said, “Oh, hello, Mr. Bracken. Come on in and sit down.”

Mr. Bracken’s slippers made a slithering sound as he scuffled into the room. He stood with both hands thrust deep into the pockets of his faded brown bathrobe, a little gray bright-eyed man with hollow cheeks and a twinkle in his voice. “I hear you’ve been having a tough time of it these last few days,” he said.

“Well, I can’t say I enjoyed it,” grinned Neal. “But the worst is over now, I guess.”

“This is the last operation?”

“Yes. I had my hip and the other knee done last winter.”

“It’s been a long pull, hasn’t it? But it’s worth it if it gets you out of this bed, heh?”

Neal nodded.

“And it will. It won’t be long before you’ll be doing a jig for us out here in the hall.”

But will you be here to see it? thought Neal. Strange to see him standing there, to hear him talk and laugh, and to think that in such a short time he would be dead. A knife hanging over his head, following him wherever he went, the first thing he saw when he woke up in the morning, and the last thing at

\* From *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, 1934. Reprinted by permission of the author and of the publishers.

## THE PEARL

night. Waiting, always waiting for the next stab of pain, wondering each time if it would be his last. Perhaps it was pricking him now as he stood there smiling. How could he be so unconcerned? But probably they hadn't told him. He *couldn't* know, Neal decided.

"I've got a lot of magazines down in my room," Mr. Bracken was saying. "I wondered if you'd like to see them."

"Thanks, I should . . ." Mr. Bracken started toward the door. "But there's no hurry. I shouldn't be able to look at them now anyway. I'm expecting someone."

The old man came back into the room. "That little girl who comes to see you, maybe?" he twinkled.

"She hasn't been here for three days. They wouldn't let anyone come while I was so sick."

"She's a pretty one, all right. And she's fond of you, too."

Neal stared, wonderingly.

"I happened to be going by as she came out of your room the other day and I saw her eyes," explained Mr. Bracken. "You're lucky, my friend. And I hope you're as fond of her as she is of you."

"I . . . I think I am," Neal stammered.

"You *think*? Don't you *know*, man?"

"I hope to marry her as soon as I get on my feet again."

"Good. Have you told her so yet? Don't be offended, my boy, if I talk right out. I'm an old man, twice as old as you—how old are you, by the way?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Yes, I'm well over twice your age, and I tell you, it warms me to see two young people getting together."

## II

Neal's first impulse was to withdraw inside his shell. But he realized at once that to do so would be ridiculous. The old man's interest was so plainly sincere, the natural manifestation of a genuine kindness, that Neal's heart went out to him. And he was really delighted to be able to talk about Gay to one who

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

seemed to appreciate her so well. "I tried to ask her last time she was here," he laughed. "But she wouldn't let me say a word, and then Miss Tupp came and made her go."

"She has real fire in her, that little girl. The real thing. I can tell pretty quick what people are like inside. And she's the real thing. You're lucky to have found one like her. Most of the people you meet in this world are afraid to have any honest feelings. All dried up inside. She'll take some delicate handling, though. She has a bit of a temper, now, hasn't she?"

"Well, sometimes she . . ."

"And you have quite a few squabbles, heh?"

"It's true we don't always understand each other. Our natures are so very different. We really have very little in common—too little, I think sometimes. It makes me afraid."

"Too little in common, is it? But what are you saying, my friend? You love each other, don't you? And what more do you want than that?"

"But a man can't do nothing but make love all day. 'Sweet delights' have a way of turning pretty sour after a time. Not long ago I read a poem by Joseph Auslander. He speaks of 'our dreary fashion of playing little games with passion.'"

"Now don't be twisting my meaning that way," broke in Mr. Bracken.

"But it's so easy to be carried away."

"Well, but good Lord, and why not, I'd like to know? You ought to thank God you still can be."

"The trouble is, though, that that sort of thing usually brings disillusionment afterward. And after you've been burnt a few times you can't help growing more cautious in giving yourself."

Mr. Bracken grunted. "Being burnt is seldom fatal. In fact, it may even do you a lot of good." He laughed, as at something uproariously funny, great silent heaves that shook his whole body. "But I think you're inclined to be a bit sniffy, ain't you?"

"Not at all." Neal was beginning to bristle.

"Now don't you be thinking I mean to make fun of you. No,

## THE PEARL

no—nothing of the kind. I see you take yourself very seriously. But there, you'll get over that later on."

"I suppose love *is* the most important thing in life," said Neal slowly. "But it isn't the only thing. There's your relation with other people, and earning a living—and there's art. A man has to do something."

"Aye, that's true enough. A man has to do something, if he's got any gumption in him at all. But to deny love for these things, to put work, society, art, before love—ah, don't fall into that error. A man must be crazy to do such a thing—unless he has to." The old man advanced a step and lifted his forefinger, almost menacingly, "If I were God I would make denial of love the greatest sin of all, perhaps the only sin." He stopped short, and, breaking into a pitifully eager, self-deprecating smile, he looked searchingly at Neal, as if seized with a suspicion that the other might be laughing at him.

"I guess I feel as you do at bottom. But you know how it is. We waste ourselves straining after things that really mean nothing to us, and we never appreciate what we have got until we've lost it."

"Aye. Just take my word for it—if you're lucky enough to have a real love offered you, don't be stopping to look down its throat or ask a lot of questions. Snatch at it with both hands, and don't let anything, not anything, get in your way—do you understand me, my friend? Whatever you do, don't lay up regrets to haunt you when you're old. Hold fast to that little girl of yours and be satisfied. Everything else is only children's games to help pass the time of waiting—or to kill the pain of regret."

"But there must be, don't you think, some solid foundation of understanding, of interests in common, if the love is to last?"

"You talk very glibly of understanding, but what is it, after all? My friend, no one ever understands anyone else—at least not so long as they keep on talking. The only understanding that's worth a hoot comes in flashes—you may be total strangers passing in a crowd and know each other better in a single glance than people who live a whole lifetime together."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Mr. Bracken walked back and forth a little. Then suddenly: "Listen. I'll tell you something. Most young people think that love comes all complete from Heaven. They think all they have to do—if they think about it at all—is to get themselves legally tied together and then let Nature do the rest, while they each go on as usual about their own selfish concerns. But love—the only kind worth calling love—has got to be made, created; it's a work of art, like a book, a painting, a song, only more so because it takes two to make it. And to make that kind of love you've got to have plenty of patience and faith,—maybe they're the same thing,—but most of all you've got to be big."

Again that humble eager little smile lit up his thin face. It was almost as if the old fellow were pleading with him, thought Neal. "But I guess I've preached enough for one day. You'll be thinking I'm a tiresome old fool." Neal opened his mouth to dissent, but Mr. Bracken went right on. "But then it's about the only real pleasure left us old ones, telling others how to live their lives—even though we've made a pretty sorry mess of our own." He moved toward the door. "I'll get those magazines now. And do you like candy? I've got a big box. They wouldn't let me eat sweets for a long time, but now the doctor says I can eat anything I like. These doctors . . ." He chuckled and winked at Neal. "So I bought myself a big box—but you know, it's a funny thing, I don't seem to care much about it now. . . . I'll be right back."

Neal stared after him in numb astonishment. He *does* know, he thought. But how can he be so serene with that knowledge in the back of his head all the time? By midsummer he would be dead. And he knew it! But the old fellow knew something else, too, some secret of living which was still hidden from Neal. What was this knowledge that was stronger than the knowledge of pain and the death growing inside him?

### III

"Well, aren't you ever going to say hello?"

Neal looked over the top of his book toward the voice.



## THE PEARL

"I must say you don't seem very glad to see me," laughed Gay.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Five minutes."

"That's a lie."

"Well, at least thirty seconds." She came in, but stopped in the middle of the room, where she stood gazing at him. "You look a lot better than the last time I saw you. How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"No, now really . . ."

"I really do feel a lot stronger. But I never felt so weak in my life as I did the other day. Even talking was a tremendous effort."

"And still you insisted on trying to talk. You were so sweet. I wanted to hug you."

"Well, and who stopped you, I'd like to know?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Miss Tupp made me promise not to let you talk. She wouldn't let me come in at all at first. But I hung around and kept bothering her so. . . . And now she just told me you were worse again afterward. She said you had a high temperature and much more pain for two days."

"Oh, don't pay any attention to her."

"And all on my account."

"It was worth it."

"Oh, you! . . . It's useless trying to talk seriously to you."

"When I do try to talk seriously you shut me up."

"What was it you were going to tell me that day?"

Neal laughed. "Ho! I thought that was coming."

"Tell me."

"It was nothing, really. I was only going to tell you that you are going to marry me as soon as I get on my feet, and that it won't be long."

Gay was suddenly looking at him through eyes shiny with tears. She turned and walked slowly to the bureau, where she set down her pocketbook. Then, moving very deliberately, she took off her coat and hat. Neal waited without impatience, laughing inside, as she gave a couple of little pokes at her hair,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

then turned again and, leaning against the bureau, stood looking at him.

"I read once that women always cry when they are proposed to," he said. "Tell me, why is that?"

She pulled a chair up close to the bed and sat down, bending forward with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her crossed hands. "I wasn't crying," she said. "And besides, I don't call that a proposal. It sounded more like a statement, or a command." Her eyes were dancing gloriously now.

"Call it what you like. But it's a fact, anyway."

She reached out and, taking his hand, gave it a little squeeze. "As soon as you can get around you must come and visit us. Mamma is going to take a cottage up at the Lake again. You ought to be able to come by the middle of the summer, don't you think?"

"Maybe by the end of July. It would be nice."

"We'll go driving together, and I'll take you out in the canoe. I'm really a very good paddler now—remember how you used to laugh at me? And you can sit on the dock and watch me swimming. Maybe before the summer's over you could go in, too."

"That's one of the things I look forward to most—to be able to swim, to feel water flowing over my skin. You don't know what a privilege it will be just to be able to sit in a bathtub again. I often dream of it. But it seems almost too good to be true after all these years on my back."

"You'll be able to, and soon. There's no doubt of it."

"And will you let me have a little time every morning to write?"

Gay pretended to consider. "Well, I might let you have a few minutes."

"These last few days while I've been lying here I've been thinking of a novel I want to write. Shall I tell you about it?"

Gay nodded.

## THE PEARL

### IV

"The main idea of it is the eternal quest for happiness—the quest that occupies every living thing every minute of its life from birth to death, whether it knows it or not. Of course every book is built round the same idea, though usually unconsciously. But in my book the seeking will be conscious. It will be divided into three parts, corresponding roughly to the movements of a symphony, with two main conflicting themes, the themes of love and death, running through the whole thing. I don't mean death in a strictly literal sense so much as in Proust's sense of our lives being a continual succession of little deaths. In the first part there will be a working out of these two themes in a series of incidents showing how the assurance and idealism of youth, with its hopes and dreams of love and its unlimited confidence in love's power, are frustrated again and again by death, in the form of disillusionment, misunderstanding, despair. And this part will close on a note of wistful yearning and questioning."

Neal spoke slowly, pausing every now and then for an appreciable interval while he searched for the exact word.

"The second part will be more contemplative. It will be built up on slower, broader lines of action, and through it all will run a dark minor strain of brooding on the pain of daily death. Toward the end it rises to a mood of exalted serenity and faith. But this mood is shattered at its height by a sudden blind stroke of fate. And so the close will be in a rather subdued vein, on a note of ironic resignation. The last part I want to have rise gradually out of these dark depths into the light, into a grand reaffirmation of faith in the ultimate triumph of love over death.

"Of course I'll have to translate all this into terms of living people, people who talk and move convincingly. I can see the first two parts very clearly, but the last is still cloudy in my mind. I want it to work up to a big dramatic close, but I can't see yet just how to do it. That will work itself out, though, I suppose, when the time comes. What do you think of it? I can hardly wait to begin work at it."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Neal turned to Gay expectantly. Suddenly he knew that her approval meant a very great deal to him. But there was no doubt in his mind that she would approve.

Her eyes fell before his. Then abruptly she got to her feet and went slowly over to the bureau. He stared wondering while she fumbled in her pocketbook.

"You must tell me frankly . . ." he began.

Before he knew it she was halfway to the door. "Have to phone," she tossed over her shoulder. ". . . right back."

### v

Neal lay rigid, staring at the empty frame of the doorway. If she had reached out and slapped him he could not have felt more astonished, more hurt. So, all the while he had been telling her, she had been thinking of something else. Probably wishing he would hurry up and finish so she could go and telephone. His novel meant nothing to her. She's interested in me only as a prospective husband, he thought, one who will play with her and make love to her—nothing more. He felt betrayed in the innermost depths of his being. His thoughts whirled in darkness round his dying dream.

He had no idea how long she had been gone. She came in laughing.

"By the way, I meant to tell you," she said, "Phil Vallin is getting up a party to go for a cruise on his yacht. They'll be gone two months and he asked me to go."

Neal looked at her blankly, still too much preoccupied with his disappointment to comprehend. Then in a flash he saw it all. So that was why she had gone to telephone—to talk to Phil.

"When do you go?" he said. His voice sounded brittle, remote.

She stopped short and looked at him curiously. He noticed that she was carrying something in the cup of her hand, but could not see what it was.

"I don't know for certain when they're going. Phil's talking about sometime next week, though."

## THE PEARL

The tone in which she said this puzzled him. He searched her face for the hidden meaning. What had happened to them, anyway? But this was impossible! It was the same face, the same eyes, nose, and mouth, even the same little smile at the corner of her mouth, yet somehow it was different, oh, so different—there was now a coldness, an aloofness, where a few minutes ago there had been only tenderness. She stayed very still in the middle of the room, head drooping, her gaze apparently fixed on what she held in her hand. What was it, he wondered. But what had come over them both? They had been so close, so sure of each other. He would have sworn they could never be separate again. Yet here they were, staring like strangers. He wanted to say to her, "Let's not be silly again, Gay." But the words would not come. He was changed too, frozen hard.

Something hard and immovable was standing there between them, more impenetrable than any wall of stone. Was it pride, merely? It was as if a spell had been put upon them, as if they had both been turned to stone—for denial of their love, perhaps, he thought in a flash of ironical whimsy, remembering Mr. Bracken. Yet she knew he loved her, and he knew she loved him.

This stiff silence was rapidly growing unbearable. What was going on inside that head, whose outer curves were so familiar to him? He realized with a shock that he had not the slightest idea. And she was nearer to him than any other person on earth! He shuddered in a kind of panicky terror as it came over him how ineluctably alone and separate he and she, and everyone, really were. But they could not go on in this moveless silence any longer. Something *had* to happen or in another minute he would begin to shout or laugh. Yet he knew deep down that he would do nothing of the sort.

Suddenly something else that Mr. Bracken had said came back to him: "Love, the only kind worth calling love, has got to be made, created . . . a real love is a work of art . . . but you've got to be big . . ." Yes, it was so. A real love was to be won only through pain and renunciation, through much sweating of blood.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

*Was* he big enough? But was it worth all the effort, all the torment? Suppose it meant the sacrifice of something deep down, the betrayal of your innermost integrity?

Neal found himself staring at the points of the small bow on the front of Gay's dress formed by the crossed ends of her white piqué collar. They made him think of wings. But the bow had been twisted askew and the ends crumpled, probably by the pressure of her coat. And as he gazed he saw her standing before her mirror just before she came out that afternoon, pulling the bow into position, twisting, patting it till it was just so, and then pinning it in place with that small square of chrysoprase he himself had given her, and all the while smiling at her reflection in happy anticipation of his pleasure on seeing her.

But what was this precious pride of integrity worth to him in the presence of this hurt in her eyes? "It isn't easy, is it, Gay?"

Gay looked up at him, her eyes wide and very serious. For a moment they explored each other's face, then she dropped her gaze again to her hand. Turning abruptly, she went to the bureau, where she stood apparently looking for something which was not there. Then she came back to the small table by the bed and, taking two chocolate candies from her hand, placed them on the prescription pad which Miss Tupp kept there. The candies had left a smudge of chocolate on the palm of her hand. Neal wanted to laugh and cry at the same time as she looked round in helpless indecision. But when she began to lick the chocolate off her hand his laughter suddenly burst forth. She smiled back at him through her fingers.

"I was talking to a friend of yours," she said. "The old man—he's passing around a box of candy and says he'll bring you what's left in a little while—if there is any left. I thought I'd better bring these while I could. I had mine outside."

"Why do we always have to hurt each other?" He reached out and took her hand. "If you really want to go on the cruise, I won't mind. But no, I will mind,—I'll miss you like the devil, of course,—but I want you to do only what *you* want to do. And the change might do you a lot of good."

## THE PEARL

"I have no intention of going. I told Phil right off. I wouldn't think of leaving you, especially now."

"But I thought . . ."

"I just wanted to see what you'd say. It was silly of me, but I wanted you to get all excited and tell me I couldn't go. And then you only said, 'When are you going?'—just as if you didn't care whether I went or not."

"But that phone call?"

"Stupid! There wasn't any phone call. You thought I wasn't interested in your novel, didn't you? But it wasn't so. Only I was afraid if I stayed another second I'd start bawling like a baby—and, I hate women who cry all the time."

"For heaven's sake, why should you cry?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess because it seemed so . . . so . . . that you should feel that way after all you've been through . . ."

Neal laughed. "But just think how Beethoven suffered, and Mozart, and, for that matter, every great artist. Why, an artist *has* to suffer before he can create anything really worth while. . . . Life's a queer business, isn't it?"

Suddenly that little crumpled bow on her breast had somehow gathered into itself all the ineffable pathos and mystery of the entire universe, and for a single breathless second he went journeying out through eternity: He saw countless billions of living identities, sentient beings all,—human, subhuman, and perhaps superhuman too,—all groping ineffectually through a maze of fears and desires for countless ages past and to come, each one an individual consciousness pursuing its unique illusion, driven incessantly by needs whose satisfaction was of supreme importance to itself. . . .

"Just think of all the couples like us who are groping blindly toward some bright ecstasy of contact—so anxious to please each other, and yet somehow always getting tangled up in misunderstandings, hurting each other in spite of themselves. . . . Why is it?"

"We can't expect to have things go smoothly all the time."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

There must be some bumps or we shouldn't appreciate what we have."

"Yes, but how about all those who never have anything but bumps? Or perhaps one little moment, at best a handful of moments, of imperfect happiness bought by a lifetime of pain and doubt? It seems so futile, so monstrously cruel. Why must it be so?"

"You must know there is no answer."

"Oh, yes, I know. But I can't help wondering, just the same. It's the way I'm made, I guess. It's a need to seek, to explore the darkness that surrounds and shuts us in—a need to know, not because knowing matters in itself, but because we must keep on growing, looking for light, like the seed that seeks the sun and grows into a flower or a tree. 'Ripeness is all.' Shakespeare knew."

"Well, then, why can't you be content, like a flower, just to live in the sun and enjoy life while you can?"

"Maybe because I'm not a flower. But I wonder if we ever shall be able to live free and easy without these perpetual misunderstandings. Maybe after we've lived together for a while . . ."

"But you'll always be a mystery to me. You're like a bubble. One minute I think I know you and I reach out toward you, and poof—you're a mystery again."

"I suppose it's inevitable. In the end we're alone and we might as well accept it. Yet I can't help trying, just the same. It's one of the fundamental ironies of life. Our heads may know that we can never escape from ourselves, but our hearts refuse to believe it. . . . The merest commonplace, of course, but immediately behind it lies the Ultimate Mystery."

Neal heard a low gurgle and looked up. Gay's head was nodding slowly with an air of grave acquiescence, but laughter was spilling from her eyes. He grinned.

"Here I am, at it again. I guess I'm incurable."

"You're looking for the Holy Grail."

Neal stared. Did she really understand, after all?



## THE PEARL

"But you'll never find it. You can't, because it doesn't exist, except in your head. Why can't you be satisfied with what you have?"

"What is life but restlessness? Everything, from Orion to the electron, is constantly on the move searching for something, something unimaginable which perhaps, as you say, doesn't even exist."

### VI

Mr. Bracken appeared in the doorway. "Will you let me break in on you a minute? I brought what's left of the candy."

Gay went to take the box and several magazines which he had under his arm.

"I see you two are already acquainted," said Neal.

"Sure, we're old friends," he chuckled.

Gay stayed talking with him at the door for a time. His old gray face actually glowed with grateful pleasure. Neal watched them, thinking that he who stood there smiling would never again see autumn leaves shining in the sun. Long before the leaves began to fall he would be lying in his narrow box, staring sightless into blackness, all the wealth of practical wisdom now stored inside that head snuffed out as if it had never existed. Or *did* the personality go on at some other level of existence? Anyway, the three of them could still talk and laugh now, and perhaps that was the only thing that really mattered. . . . But it was simply impossible to grasp the whole wonder of merely being alive!

Mr. Bracken went away.

"He's a nice old man," said Gay. "I like to talk to old men. But I always feel so sorry for them."

"He has cancer. The doctors give him only three months."

Her eyes were suddenly full of tears. As she turned away, Neal marveled that she should be so touched by the knowledge that that old man, whom she had never laid eyes on until a few minutes before, had only three more months to live. Gay walked slowly to the window, stopping by the far side, where she stayed half-turned toward him but looking down into the street.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

A jumble of city sounds came up from below. Presently he knew by the sudden alertness of her expression that something down there had caught her attention. He wondered what it was. She was absorbed, utterly lost in the feeling of the moment. Mr. Bracken was forgotten, he himself, the hospital, everything. If he could only get free from his own mental top-heaviness and live wholly in the present like her, without calculation or doubt! Perhaps if he watched her long enough he would some day learn her secret.

Then all at once Neal was aware that something wonderful had happened to him. The room was suddenly full of light and he saw with new eyes, as if a veil had been lifted. As he gazed at those familiar features, all of whose charms and dear deficiencies he thought he knew so well, he realized that he had never really seen her until this instant. Why, she was beautiful beyond any words!

She turned impulsively to him. Her eyes were dancing, her mouth was opening to tell him. But what she saw in his face made her stop short. Her eyes sobered, then flamed with unbelievable tenderness. Neal caught his breath in wonder and awe. For at least a minute they stayed so, without speaking, yet knowing each other more profoundly than ever before. Then Neal heard himself laughing out.

"If you don't come here and kiss me right away," he said, "I'll bust into a thousand pieces."

She came to him and, bending, touched his forehead with her lips. He tried to draw her closer, but she withdrew just beyond his reach.

"I want a real one," he begged.

"Nope, not to-day," she laughed, shaking her head emphatically.

"When? To-morrow?"

"Maybe. If you're very good. But I'm taking no chances on making you worse again."

"All right, then, I'll wait till to-morrow. But come closer—I just want to touch you."

## THE PEARL

She reached down and took his hand. "Why, your hand is cold as ice. Do you feel all right?"

"Sure. Just a bit tired, perhaps."

"I've stayed too long. I'm going right away."

He was about to urge her to stay longer, but checked the words. All at once he was conscious that he felt very sleepy. He could hardly keep his eyes open.

### VII

When she was gone, Neal lay with his eyes shut. Funny, but as soon as he closed his eyes he no longer felt sleepy. Slightly dizzy and very weak, but he would have to expect that for a few days yet. His mind, however, was curiously alert. It was pleasant to lie perfectly still and let his thoughts dart where they would, dipping, soaring, swerving abruptly, like swallows.

Yes, this was the only understanding worthy of the name, a communion of spirit through the blood, through pure feeling. The understanding of the head was vanity and illusion, a barren mockery. . . . This feeling that filled him entirely, he knew it now—this was what he had always been waiting for, the unconscious goal of all his seeking and striving. Here was no vanity or illusion; here at last was something real, perhaps the only real thing in life, something to cling fast to, something in which he could lose himself without loss of integrity. And wasn't that just what everyone was looking for at bottom? . . . No more straining to find answers where there could be no answers. Somehow all doubt, all questioning, had ceased, and he *knew* with absolute certainty: Love is enough! It is enough for her, and who am I that I should think I have to demand more from life? This is light enough for me.

Neal heard a step. He opened his eyes to see Miss Tupp entering the room. He smiled and opened his mouth to receive the thermometer. Closing his eyes again, he was conscious of the tips of her fingers touching his wrist. Suddenly, he got the impression that she was finding his pulse not entirely as it should be. He hoped he was not going to run a temperature again—she

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

would not let him see Gay to-morrow. He looked at her as she drew the thermometer from his mouth. But she turned aside so that he could not see her face.

"Have you any pain?" she asked, after a long and impressively silent interval.

"My knee has started to ache a little. And I have a bit of pain in my chest. But I feel all right otherwise."

Miss Tupp shut the window, then went and lifted the covers to look at his feet.

"Can you feel this?" she said, squeezing the toes of his left foot.

"Feel what? I don't feel anything."

Her face grew grave. She covered his feet quickly and went out. What was it? Oh, well, he wasn't going to worry about it. She was such a fuss-box sometimes.

When you came right down to it, he reflected, everything you did was merely a snatching at pretty bubbles that burst as soon as you touched them, or a shouting to bolster up your courage, and all was equal, and nothing mattered or everything mattered, depending on how you looked at things. Gay knew, all women knew in their heart of hearts. Women were so much wiser, so much more practical, than men. Men put on a solemn air and spouted their fine logic, but women—at least those who rested content in their instinctive womanhood—cut through all this vapor to the core of things and guessed the answer immediately by some primitive earth wisdom which men had lost—if they ever had it. Women seemed to lose it, too, as soon as they became infected with the disease of male restlessness and ambition. Thank Heaven, Gay was too wise for that.

He smiled, recalling how near they had come to quarreling. And for what? He could not even remember. In imagination he was talking to her again:

"I've been so stupid, Gay. Try to be patient with me. You know I'm just like a clam—or an oyster—the way I close up tight inside my shell at the slightest jolt."

"But oysters sometimes have pearls."

## THE PEARL

"Yes, if there is a grain of sand to irritate them. Ho! You are my grain of sand."

"And your novel will be the pearl."

"No. You are also the pearl. But for you I'd be only an oyster, indistinguishable from a million other oysters. And an oyster, in itself, is not very pretty."

He laughed and wished she were here now so that he could tell her. To-morrow he would. And she would laugh at him; he could almost hear her now. And he would say, "Whenever you see that oyster look coming into my eyes, just laugh at me, will you?" Her laughter was the anchor that kept his bubble from losing itself in the clouds.

### VIII

The pain in his chest was increasing rapidly. He also began to have trouble getting enough breath. He wished Miss Tupp would come back. He was on the point of calling her when she came in. She carried a hypodermic needle.

"How is the pain—in your chest, I mean?"

"It's getting worse all the time. What do you think it is?"

"This ought to relieve it."

Gratefully he breathed in the fresh clean smell of the alcohol. The needle pricked into his arm. The stuff burned a little as it went in. Just as she withdrew the needle Dr. Yerd, the House Surgeon, came in. He felt Neal's pulse, then pulled a stethoscope out of his pocket and listened impassively as he moved the end of it slowly over his chest. After that, Miss Tupp uncovered Neal's left foot again.

"Can you move your toes?" said Dr. Yerd.

Neal tried, but it was as if he had no toes on that foot. He studied Dr. Yerd's face anxiously, but could tell nothing of his thoughts. Miss Tupp covered his foot again; then she and Dr. Yerd went out. She closed the door after her. Why had she closed the door? She knew he didn't like being shut in this way. Something had gone wrong, that was plain. What was it? Then he remembered something: that woman across the hall

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

a couple of months ago—she had been getting along so well after an operation, was expecting to go home in two more days, but something had happened to her, and within a few hours she was dead—embolus, they had called it.

Is *that* what has happened to me? But it would be too funny, after all my fine talk to-day. Fear suddenly gripped him. *Is this the end?*

Miss Tupp came back soon, shutting the door behind her. She drew up a chair and sat with her finger on Neal's wrist.

"How is the pain now?"

"About the same. But it's harder to get my breath."

He wanted to ask her, but didn't dare. This couldn't happen to me, he kept saying to himself over and over. Life couldn't be so cruel. But reason kept prodding him: Yet it does happen to others, every day, every minute of the day, somewhere. Why not to me? At last he could bear the uncertainty no longer.

"Is it . . . is it anything serious?"

"Now don't you worry. Just close your eyes and try to relax."

The tone in which she said this brought him some comfort. She didn't sound worried. She seemed almost cheerful. He smiled inwardly. That tone of brisk professional cheerfulness had so often amused him.

His gaze, which had been fixed pleadingly upon her face, was caught by a beam of light. The waning sun had come round to strike directly on the two chocolate candies which still rested on the prescription pad just where Gay had placed them. Was it a sign, an omen that he would not die? He snatched at the notion eagerly and, though he scoffed at himself for being so childishly superstitious, felt more cheerful all the same. He nodded toward the candies.

"You'd better move them out of the sun. They might melt." She moved the pad. "Won't you have some? There's a box over there," he said.

She shook her head negatively, and all at once a new doubt struck him like a blow. Would she tell him the truth? To-morrow the sun would be shining in that window again just as it

## THE PEARL

did now, but would he be here to see it? Black terror descended on him again.

Death—it too was real! Was that the final answer? And was he going to learn that answer now, so soon?

“O God,” he breathed, “I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die! I’ve just learned how to live! . . .”

Ten minutes later Neal was dead.

## Mr. Onion \*

DANA BURNETT

*Dana Burnett was born in Ohio, was graduated from Cornell University, and was on The New York Sun for nine years. He is a poet, a playwright, and a short story writer whose work has appeared in numerous magazines.*

IT was when she went to turn out the light back of the sofa that Marian discovered Mr. Onion perched on top of the bookshelves. Dressed in his perennial clown's costume, and holding in his hands the ladder that was an integral part of his character, he stood patiently grinning down at her. His grin was ludicrous. It was also faintly pathetic, as every true clown's grin should be.

Marian thought: Jackie must have climbed up on the sofa last night before he went to bed and put Mr. Onion on top of the bookshelves. . . . Funny that I never noticed him there. . . . But I was so busy with things . . . people. . . . Good Lord! What a party! They must have had a good time. . . . They stayed till daylight. . . . But our crowd always has a good time. . . .

"I'll take Mr. Onion back to the nursery; Jackie adores him. . . . He cares more for that clown than for all his other toys put together. . . ."

But when she reached for the little wooden figure a weakness seized her. She began to laugh hysterically. She was so very tired and Mr. Onion was so very absurd. So unalterably absurd. . . . And so pathetic. . . . It was the way his painted mouth turned up at the corners. . . .

\* From *Collier's*, August 21, 1926. Reprinted by permission of Brandt and Brandt.



## MR. ONION

She sank down on the sofa, shaking with uncontrollable laughter. John came stumbling in from their bedroom. His coat was off, and his tie dangled like a wilted purple flag from his loosened collar.

"'Matter, old girl?"

"Look! F-funny. . . ."

"Oh, Mr. Onion?"

"Y-e-e-s!"

"But what's funny? Where's the joke?"

"I—don't—know. I think it's his grin. . . . No, it's the ladder," gasped Marian helplessly. "Why must he always carry a ladder? It's so p-pointless."

"Everything's pointless at five o'clock in the morning," grumbled John, yawning. "Come on to bed, Marian. You're worn out. So am I. The damned party lasted too long," he added, with sudden irritability.

"To think of Mr. Onion's standing up there all night watching us!" said Marian, sighing. "I wonder what he thought of us!"

"Sick of parties," said John. "Come to bed—"

But somehow they didn't go to bed just then. The great rush of light across the sea and up the hill and through the windows of their cottage may have struck them all at once as something too precious to be wasted. Or possibly they were still a trifle dizzy from the effect of their own hospitality and wanted to cool their heads in the fresh morning air; or possibly they were just too exhausted to do anything very definite. . . .

They drifted out of doors and sat down on the rustic bench that stood at the edge of the hill, facing the sea. . . . Marian, in her crumpled evening dress, with her black hair curling flatly about her pretty, tired face, with something rather strange and crumpled in her eyes, was a mildly fascinating figure to John, her husband. They had been married six years, he reflected remotely. Nice to know that Marian could still turn into a woman he had never seen before.

But was there, perhaps, a chance, a slight chance, that some

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

day she might turn into a complete—and permanent—stranger? He had watched her last night dancing with Tom Nevinson. Nevinson was keen on Marian. He had fallen for her in the frankly casual way that men now fell for other men's wives. It was a case according to the modern code. Also according to the modern code John Thurston was forbidden the old-fashioned emotion of jealousy. . . . Besides, wasn't he himself more or less engaged in making love to Sally Nevinson, Tom's pert, blonde wife? Nevertheless he recalled, if not with jealousy, at least with amazement, the difference in Marian when she danced or joked or flirted with Tom. For of course she did flirt. All nice women flirted nowadays. . . . Well, what of it? They always had. . . . Only not so openly.

"I wonder what Mr. Onion *does* think of us?"

"What's on your mind, sweetheart?"

But she didn't answer directly, and his own mind floated off and away like a bit of cloud—like that fleecy cloud being driven into the sunrise by the light western breeze. It would be a fine, fair day, said his high-sailing mind. . . .

He wanted vaguely to ask Marian a question—something that would involve and bring to an issue all the unasked and unanswered questions between them. But the only thing he could think of was: Where did Mr. Onion come from?

He couldn't remember, at the moment, who had given Jackie that ridiculous clown. His lapse of memory annoyed him. It invested Mr. Onion with a certain mystery; with a certain importance.

Oh, nonsense! Why not ask Marian? Of course she would know. She could recite offhand the origin and history of any of Jackie's toys. But he wouldn't ask her. He wouldn't be so silly. As though there could be any mystery about a child's plaything!

"By the way, Marian, whoever gave Jackie that darned clown?"

"I don't know," answered his wife absently.

"What? You must know!"

"Well, I don't. We were never able to find out. . . . Don't you remember? He just turned up that Christmas, and we never

## MR. ONION

knew who sent him. We never found the card. I made quite an effort, too—asked everyone I could think of—because Jackie adored him so. But I never found out. . . .”

“Uh-huh,” said John.

“It was Jackie who named him,” added Marian, with a sleepy, reminiscent smile. . . . She could hear, by some mental process that was more than memory, little Jackie’s grave, childish voice murmuring in her ears, drumming at her heart. . . . “The clown’s name is Mr. Onion. He has a funny name because clowns are funny people. And he has a ladder because he likes it. He can do tricks on it if he wants to. But he’d rather just carry it. It makes him feel like he was going to climb something.”

Marian smiled, thinking of Jackie still asleep in his safe, white bed, in the wing of the cottage which they had built five years ago when he was born. Safe bed, safe house, safe beautiful country. . . . The Maine shore in August. . . . No place on earth more perfect for a child!

All safe! Yet, curiously, deep down in her tired body, in her brooding mind, she was aware of a blankness, a shadow that was almost fear. Life, in its essence, was so fragile. . . . And there was so much of it that was mere doubt and dream and nebulous, swiftly changing chemical reaction. . . .

“We have no God,” she said abruptly but very simply, as though uttering a familiar and commonplace thought.

John stirred beside her. He uncrossed and stretched his long flannel-clad legs. “And what,” he asked, “would we be doing with a God if we had one?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Pray to Him. . . . Depend on Him. . . . Have Him in for tea—and conversation.”

“You’ve been looking at the sun. It’s made you religious,” he said.

“The sun’s too impersonal,” replied Marian. “Sometimes when you want it most it goes under a cloud. . . . I’d rather like a God,” she continued murmurously, “who would always be on hand in case of—of emergency.”

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

John twisted about, with an effort, to look at her.

"Are you serious, old girl?"

"Serious? Yes, I think so."

"How come? What's the big idea? We've got along all right so far without any particular household deity."

"Have we?" breathed Marian.

"Well, haven't we?" he countered.

"I don't know," she said again slowly. "I wonder—I can't help wondering whether we, whether people like us—our generation—are as successful at living as we like to think we are. We pretend to a good deal of—advancement. Progress. . . . But I'm not so sure. We've dragged out a lot of the old bugaboos and made faces at them. We've learned to admit that we have bodies, and we've organized a parade of the senses—with Papa Freud as drum major. We've abolished vice by the simple process of making a virtue of it. And maybe these things help. They're a kind of oil—banana oil—that we keep pouring out to smooth over the surface! But there's something volcanic at the center. I feel it—so often! A kind of restlessness, an uncertainty, as though we were living over a storm that might break at any moment—"

"Don't," said John placidly. "What's the use?"

"You feel it too!"

"Well—yes—in a way. Who doesn't? But—no good expecting things to happen. Besides, what can happen to us? I mean, barring some accident."

"That's just it. Accidents do happen. Oh, why not admit that it's all accident? And—the trouble with us is that we've never been *through* anything. We don't know our own strength or our own weakness—"

"Oh, well," interrupted John, "we've got—anyway—a philosophy. A kind of philosophy. At least I have." He glanced at her rather defiantly, but she was staring at the golden east, at the infinite cobalt sea. "I believe in myself, in my own vitality—"

"Yes, dear, I know." This was the modern credo. She had heard it so many times before.

MR. ONION

"Vitality's the only virtue. Be a good animal! Take Jackie, for instance. People are always harping on what a healthy kid he is—as though that were some sort of accident. It makes me sore! Why shouldn't he be healthy?" demanded Jackie's father. "You and I are healthy, decent people. He's our child. There's a kind of reason in it, a kind of logic."

"But life so frequently isn't logical," objected Marian in a voice as distant as her gaze. "There's so often a gap, a vacancy, a lost link in the chain—"

"I don't feel that. I have my work, you know." He was a trifle stiff with fatigue.

"Does it satisfy you? Does your painting really satisfy you?"

"If it didn't, why would I go on with it?"

"Why not? One has to do something. . . . I've suspected, at times, that it was simply a salve to your conscience, an excuse for loafing," she said with a frankness born, perhaps, of sheer physical exhaustion.

"I see," grunted John. Then he laughed shortly. "Hell! as long as we're telling our real names this morning, I'd like to know—if you don't mind—just how much that bird Nevinson means in your young life."

"Tom?" Her voice was a languid note in the increasing breeze. "Does Tom strike you as being—important?"

"Not as a person perhaps. But as a symptom—"

"Yes, I grant you that. Tom may be a symptom. . . . Of what, I wonder? Because I really don't know. I'm not a promiscuous sort of woman, am I? Do you think I am?"

"I hope not," answered her husband.

"Why do I bother with Tom at all? Why do you bother with Sally?"

"Oh, Sally . . ." mumbled John.

"You kissed her last night. I saw you. . . . When you were dancing on the porch. Tom hasn't kissed me—yet. Not really. But he will. It's coming to that. I suppose I'm a fool to tell you this, but I do so want to know why. . . . Because we—you and I—actually care a lot about each other, don't we, John, dear?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Why, sure, a lot! A whole lot! Sure, we do." He was awkward and boyish in his desire to be emphatic. He put his hand on her arm. "Let's chuck it," he said. "Let's not play this silly game any more. You're right about my work. It *is* an excuse. But I was thinking . . . if I could get away, go somewhere . . . to Paris, maybe. Let's pull up stakes and beat it—"

She shook briefly her small, dark head.

"Paris is only another place. 'The fault, dear Brutus' . . ." The rest of the quotation was lost in the wind. "You'd find the same silly game in Paris, or wherever you decided to go. . . . Only it isn't silly. It's desperately serious. . . . The trouble is at the center. . . . What we lack is a faith—some faith—in something—beyond ourselves." Her speech was broken into staccato bits, and the spaces were filled by the rustling of leaves, by the muffled drumbeat of the surf on the beach a quarter of a mile away. "That's why we go looking into other people. . . . Always prying into other people, hoping, hoping to find the prophet of some true God. . . ."

"You'll find no prophet in Tom Nevinston," growled John.

"Perhaps not. But I'll go on looking just the same. I must look! Don't you see? I can't afford not to. I might be cheated out of some miracle. If only I could find that miracle in you," she said quietly, and turned toward him her strange, searching, weary eyes.

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"No," he said. "I won't pose. I won't play prophet or promise miracles even to make you happy. I'm not up to a hair shirt and a diet of locusts. If you can't be satisfied with a plain man who—oh, hell!" he broke off sharply. "Let's quit this. We're getting in too deep. It's just because we're so darn tired. What are we sitting out here for, anyway? Let's go in—have some breakfast—go to bed."

Miss Mosby, little Jackie's nurse, appeared in her chaste white as they sat dispiritedly at breakfast on the screened dining porch.

"Jackie has a little cold this morning," said Miss Mosby.

## MR. ONION

"Don't let him go into the ocean, then," cautioned Marian.

"Very well, Mrs. Thurston."

"How much of a cold?" asked John, stifling a yawn.

"His nose is running," announced Miss Mosby, smoothing her prophylactic apron.

"Maybe he oughtn't to go to the beach at all," worried Marian.

"Oh, nonsense!" said her husband. "Beautiful warm day like this. Do him good to be down there in the sunshine. . . . I'll have a look at him."

He got up and went into Jackie's room.

"Hello, Big Boy! Hear you got the snuffles?"

"But not a cold," quickly replied Jackie, sitting up in bed.

"Well, I don't know. How do you feel?"

"Fine, Daddy! I don't feel sick at all. I guess I can go to the beach all right," added Jackie, and squirmed uneasily as his father seemed to deliberate. "I guess it would do me a lot of good to go to the beach, all right!"

"Beautiful day," thought John. What could happen to a healthy kid on a day like this? Well, for the love of Pete, what did he *think* was going to happen? "My nerves are shot," he decided: "staying up all night, drinking. . . . I'm jumpy. And, then, that queer talk with Marian! What was it she'd said about life being so uncertain, so—fragile—?"

"Why, sure," he decided finally. "The beach—sure! Only I wouldn't go in bathing to-day, if I were you, Big Boy. No ocean, eh? But the beach—fine! Keep out in the air; keep out in the sunshine. Do you more good than a lot of foolish medicine."

So Jackie went to the beach that morning as usual. John and Marian slept till one o'clock. Then John, after luncheon, drove off in the car to keep a tennis engagement. "Promised Sally last night I'd play doubles. . . ."

Marian shouted after him some casual sporting benediction. She was in her room, dressing. She herself had a date that afternoon with Tom. He would arrive shortly in *his* car, and they would drive out to the rocks at Devil's Cove. . . . She laughed suddenly at the patent absurdity of this exchange, this almost

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

formal, almost mechanical transfer of interests. Her husband rushing off to play with Sally, and Sally's husband rushing off to play with her! How unutterably childish! Yet all the time she was making herself as attractive as possible, putting on her smartest sport skirt, her gayest colored sweater, her most fetching hat—the yellow straw with the sprig of artificial wheat aslant the crown. . . .

Tom Nevinson arrived, a solid, rather boisterous young gallant in white flannels and a tweed jacket, who smoked an incongruous, delicate-looking briar pipe.

She listened all the way to Devil's Cove to his breezy protestations of passion. He was not (he said) the sort of poor fish who went around making love to every woman he met. Not much! Of course in his college days (this with a sigh) he'd been—well, the usual sort of indiscriminate young fool. But he'd learned by experience the value of true emotion. *And* of course he cared a lot for Sally, just as she, Marian, cared a lot for John. . . . Why, sure! He understood all that. But life was so short, and, er—it was all such a queer jumble, that—well—it seemed just a darned shame not to be honest and speak out when you met someone who really meant something to you.

"But that's such an obvious sort of truth," said Marian. "Such an old truth! And—forgive me—such an unsubstantial one. I want something more from you, Tom."

"Something more?" He was puzzled, curious, wondering whether he dared assume that she was deliberately tempting him.

"Yes. You don't happen to have any sort of *divine* truth concealed about your person, do you?"

"Any sort of what? Divine truth? Are you kidding me, my beautiful?"

"I am not."

"Well, then, I don't get you."

"All right," said Marian serenely.

"My dear girl—"



## MR. ONION

She stopped him with a quick dart of her hand toward his arm.

"Take me home, Tom."

"Not yet, Marian! Don't spoil things. This is our day, our moment—"

He drew her to him. The delicate-looking pipe was removed, with a gesture, from his lips. . . . He kissed her, and she made no protest. She made no comment, whatsoever.

She simply got up and started toward the car. He followed her.

"Marian dearest—"

"I must get home, Tom. You've got to take me. Something's happening! Something dreadful's happening— And please—drive fast."

But when she got home she found that her fear—the black fear that had seized her so unreasonably—was without justification in fact. Miss Mosby, to be sure, reported that Jackie had a little fever.

Marian nodded and went into the nursery.

"Well, Jackie boy, how do you feel?"

"Fine, Mother."

"You must keep covered up. . . . You'll be all right to-morrow. . . . Do you know who's in the living-room?"

"Mr. Nevinson," guessed Jackie, with devastating promptness.

"Yes, he is. . . . But I mean—I meant someone else. A friend of yours!"

"I don't know."

"Mr. Onion! He's standing up on top of the bookshelves—"

"Oh, yes," said Jackie. "He likes it up there."

"But—shan't I bring him to you?"

"No matter. Because Mr. Onion has to stay there for a special reason. Because if any giants or dragons come in he can see them and then he can climb down and hit them with his ladder and they'll be dead."

"Darling! Where do you get these extraordinary ideas—!"

"There's a dragon 'at' lives under the house. Mr. Onion saw

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

him, and he was all black, like when you shut your eyes tight, and Mr. Onion says he might come down the chimney—”

“Jackie! Listen to Mother! There *aren't* any giants or dragons—” blundered Marian; but she was not so sure. Jackie's faintly superior smile made her doubt the rationalistic hypothesis. . . . She leaned down and kissed him. “Blessed baby!” she murmured; and again was strangely humbled by his smile.

Returning to the living-room, she found not only Tom but also Sally and John and several others—all members of the crowd—gathered for cocktails. John was doing the honors. As she came in she caught his eye, and for an instant he stood rigid, with the cocktail shaker poised like a gleaming piston at the top of its stroke. “Anything wrong?” his raised eyebrows telegraphed her. She didn't answer. She couldn't. The moment dragged out and grew thin—grew taut as a stretched fiddle string.

The others felt this tension. Sally Nevinson had been kidding Tom about the extravagant tie he'd put on for his date with Marian. “I can always tell when Tom's hard hit. . . . His tie gives him away. . . . It's an emotional barometer. . . .” But suddenly her shrill voice broke. . . . She whirled and stared at Marian. “Good Lord!” she flung out. “What's the matter? You look as though you'd been seeing things!”

“I have,” said Marian.

John stepped forward quickly. “What is it?” he asked.

“It's a dragon that lives under the house,” replied Marian, and laughed. “Jackie's been telling me about it. . . . Give me a drink, will you, John dear? I need it for my nerves. . . . You see, I'm scared of the dragon.”

Her laugh somehow destroyed the charm of the cocktail hour. People drifted away. . . . John and Marian were left alone. “Tell me,” he said.

“There's nothing to tell.”

“Yes, there is. You know there is! Is it Tom? Is it Sally? Is it—Jackie?”

She shook her head.

## MR. ONION

"It's nothing I can put into words. It's just a feeling. A dragon under the house—"

"What's all this nonsense about a dragon?"

"It's black," said Marian.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "You're getting beyond me, old girl! I can't make you out half the time—"

"Then ask Mr. Onion!" cried Marian, pointing to the little figure on the bookshelves. "He understands—"

"What you need is sleep," decided John. "We'll cut out that dance at the country club to-night. Go to bed early. Get a good night's rest—"

It was well that they did go to bed early that night, for at three o'clock in the morning Miss Mosby woke them to say that Jackie was very ill. He had a temperature of 103 and was breathing hard. He was also coughing a good deal.

"I've already telephoned for the doctor," said the efficient Miss Mosby as Marian struggled into kimono and bedroom slippers. To John, plunging in from the sleeping porch, she said, "You had better put on your heavy dressing gown, Mr. Thurston. There's a chill in the air this morning."

A chill in the air, thought Marian. A dragon under the house. . . . So many things that can't be put into words. . . . Then it all came down to one word; to one dreadful, ominous word that was like a weight on your heart:

Pneumonia.

Dr. Moulton, the tall, kindly, capable country doctor who had ministered to Jackie's minor summer ailments since he was born, was the first to utter this word. He said it gravely, simply, as one who knows the impossibility of cheating life with accents and inflections. . . . Later, the next afternoon, it was repeated by a locally famous physician, Dr. Hurd, whom Moulton had summoned from Portland. . . . Also from Portland arrived a trained nurse. Miss Mosby hated her on sight. . . .

For three days little Jackie's life hung in the balance. Then at noon of the fourth day Dr. Moulton said to Marian: "We're

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

doin' all we can for the boy, Mrs. Thurston. But I must tell you the truth. It looks pretty bad right now. If there's anybody else you'd like to call in—"

Marian—the ghost of Marian—went straight to the ghost of her husband, John.

"I want the greatest in the country," she said. "There must be some one specialist. . . . Not that I believe he can do any more than they have done. But just because he *is* the greatest. . . ."

John nodded and went to the telephone. For more than an hour he invoked, with the meticulous patience of despair, various distant persons—beings—disembodied voices. Then five minutes of sharp, brisk, businesslike conversation, and the thing was done.

"Dr. Vance," he mumbled to Marian, wiping the sweat from his face, "leaves New York to-night on the State of Maine, arrives five-forty to-morrow morning. I mustn't forget to have a car at the station to meet him."

"To-morrow morning may be too late," said Marian, in the queer, hushed voice that had been her voice for the past four days. "If only we had someone here now. . . . If only we had some God to pray to. We have no God—"

Then John cried out, a deep, guttural cry that came from the depths of his tortured soul.

"No! We haven't. And I refuse to fake one!"

"I would if I could," said Marian. "But I can't. I've tried, and I can't—"

Toward morning they called her. She went into Jackie's room. Dr. Moulton and Dr. Hurd were standing together by the bed. The nurse whom Miss Mosby hated made a pale figure against the wall, and Miss Mosby herself was in the doorway. There was a faint light from the window; a gray hint of dawn. . . .

Marian leaned over her son. Her pose, the maternal brooding of her body, the soft fall of her hands against the mounded bedclothes, served to banish the professional restraint of the

## MR. ONION

sickroom. And when she spoke her simple question seemed somehow to transcend its own scientific futility.

"Jackie, darling, aren't you ever going to get well?"

The small figure stirred. It stirred. Then the child's voice came reluctantly—so frail an answer, so light a thread that Marian's heart almost stopped beating.

"I don't know . . . Mother. . . . You'll have to ask . . . Mr. Onion. . . ."

She straightened up at once. Miss Mosby, in the doorway, stood aside to let her pass. Miss Mosby thought that Mrs. Thurston was smiling, but she could not be sure. One could not be sure of, anything just then.

Marian walked blindly through the silent house to the door of the living-room. There she stopped, aware of something happening that must not be disturbed; aware of something going on in the twilight of that many-windowed room: a sort of birth, a revelation and a renaissance that offered high defiance to the pervading thrust of death.

A figure was kneeling before the bookshelves. She knew, of course, that it was John, but the familiar sense of him as flesh and blood was so dimmed by the uncertain light that only his pose mattered. It alone had substance, and that substance was so strange, so blurred with beauty, that she almost cried out in rapture. Then she heard his voice and she knew that he was praying.

"Listen, Mr. Onion, don't let him die. Save him, save Jackie. . . . Mr. Onion. . . . He loves you. That makes you alive. He believes in you. That makes you divine. . . . Listen, you've got to! He believes in you. You're his greatest treasure. You're the wonder of his life. I love him too, but my love isn't enough. . . . Because I've never been more to him than his father. . . . I've never given him magic. . . . I've never given him wonder. . . . Oh, Mr. Onion. . . . Mr. Onion! Oh, God. . . . Save him. . . . I ask you on my knees. . . . I pray to you—"

The strangely articulate, strangely broken voice went on like a groping music that hadn't quite learned to be music. And the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

light creeping up the hill and warming the windows was like a mute response. . . . Marian turned and ran, sure-footed among shadowy pieces of furniture, among shadowy fears, back to the nursery. The two doctors now were leaning over the bed, but she paid no attention to them. She too leaned down; she would remember this bending of her body all her life long. . . .

"Jackie! Can you hear me?"

The frail voice came after an interval: "Yes, Mother."

"Then—listen, darling. I asked—Daddy asked Mr. Onion if you were going to get well, and Mr. Onion said 'Yes.' He said—you were to try very hard and then you'd get well—"

"Mr. Onion said—"

"That it was all right! That you were going to get well!" There was a moment of absolute stillness. Then Jackie sighed—a faint, far sigh of reassurance, of childish contentment and peace. Then, turning on his side, he nestled down comfortably to sleep.

A moment later Marian heard the crunch of car wheels on the drive outside the house and knew that Dr. Vance, the great specialist, had arrived. But she knew also that he was only another lay figure, another supernumerary in the transpired drama that could not be put into words; that could never be put into words. . . .

Dr. Vance appeared, puffing. He was a little, round, fussy man who waddled in and looked at Jackie, and said: "Ah, Hum! Indeed!" and waddled out again, with John and Marian tagging at his heels.

"I want some breakfast. Angels in heaven, what a train! *What* a train! I want some coffee. With hot milk and no sugar. And three eggs boiled four minutes by the clock. By the clock, mind you! I'm very particular about my eggs."

"Jackie!" blurted out John with a racked smile. "What about Jackie?"

"Going to get well. Well now. Keep him warm. Keep the windows open. Of *course*! Healthy youngster. Good air. *Bound* to pull through. Ask your doctors. I'm not a doctor. I'm a traveling man. Cost you five hundred dollars. Highway robbery. Can't

help it. Must keep people in awe of specialists. Only way to do it is to overcharge them. If you have an old-fashioned coffeepot, I prefer it to the modern percolator. And I like my toast just a little bit burned at the edges. . . ."

An hour later John and Marian were sitting on the bench at the edge of the hill, facing the sea. Their bodies a little apart, their hands not touching, they experienced nevertheless that knowledge of each other, that sense of contact which is marriage rarely realized.

"So I prayed," said John. "I had to. If it was cowardice, then it was cowardice. But I had to."

"I know. . . . I heard you. . . . I came to the door while you were kneeling there. . . ."

"Funny thing," he said.

"Beautiful thing," said Marian.

"It was real. That's what I mean. And—it's going to make a difference. Can't go on living as we have been . . . do the same things, maybe. But there'll be a new element in everything. . . . Always a new element. . . . Only I suspect it's old . . . old and—indispensable. The element of search—man searching for the source of his wonder, man searching for his God. . . ."

"That's what I tried to say to you the other day, the other morning."

"It can't be said," replied John. "It can never be said. Because there's no guide to the search and no definition for the thing found. There's only the necessity—I felt that last night—for man to go beyond himself, to go beyond reason, even beyond truth, as Jackie's young mind went beyond the truth of Mr. Onion. . . . Mr. Onion can be explained, but Jackie's thought of him can never be explained . . . but somewhere along the path of that thought is the power and the glory. . . ."

"We can never tell anyone," said Marian. "This is our secret, and this is . . . our wedding day."

"Happy is the bride the sun shines on," said John.

## Cocktail Party\*

JANET CURREN OWEN

*Janet Curren Owen, a busy New Yorker with a husband and two children, nevertheless finds time to write excellent fiction. Several of her stories have appeared in Harper's Magazine, The Forum and elsewhere.*

NEITHER the shadowy film of dust on the toile curtains nor the litter of toys on the floor could much detract from the original beauty of the room. There was loveliness of line in the curve of the open staircase, and the twin arches of the deep bookshelves rose purely over rows of colorful books. But disorderliness hung about the room; it was acutely perceptible to Lucia because she had not yet forgotten the clear windowpanes, the shining silver, the well-brushed cushions, and the dandiacally precise attitudes of the little chairs and tables. Without at all taxing her imagination, she could see Hilda as she had stood over the piano, and a gesture with which the girl had run her cloth between the black and white keys was bright in her mind. She herself would never be able to achieve quite that air of perfection in any place.

She turned her attention to the two little boys who had scratched up the thick nap of the carpet with their ferocious propelling of a scarlet fire engine, and she told herself that it was enough to have kept them both clean, amused, and—well fed. She had done well; so long as their robust bodies were live and eager, what did it matter that actual sadness filled her because, before her eyes, her house grew daily more unlovely in disorder?

For a moment, watching the little boys, her thin face was

\* From *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1933. Reprinted by permission of Mrs. Owen and *Harper's Magazine*.



## COCKTAIL PARTY

pleased and interested, a cloudy preoccupation entirely erased from it. Then she became conscious of the strained taut feeling in her thighs, of the dead ache between her shoulderblades. She had been used to seeing her laundresses comfortably sitting at their ironing, but when she had come to do it herself she found she was too light and small. Hours of standing over the board and of throwing all her weight onto the heavy iron left her senseless with fatigue. Thoughtlessly she sighed aloud as she sank back into her chair with her legs stretched straight out before her.

Immediately Clay looked up from his book.

"Tired?" he asked softly.

She glanced sideward toward him, seeing in a flash how he was at ease in an old tweed coat and flannel trousers. She knew exactly how she meant to scream at him, "Tired, you idiot! I'm dying of tiredness. I tell you I can't—" But her frown of hysterical irritation passed like a shadow before it had settled. She smiled mechanically and drew up her relaxed limbs.

"Oh, a little," she said. "But go out and look at the superb ironing I've finished. Hung out on the clothes-horse, pure as—Go along; go and see."

He rose with an indulgent expression and strolled toward the kitchen. When he had disappeared Lucia hurried after him to hang over his shoulder as he gazed with admiration. Her eye became critical as she tried to see with his perceptions. She darted round in front of him and folded out of sight a small scorched spot.

"Nothing," she said. "It's nothing."

• She brushed the garment airily.

"Here, what's this!" he cried. "You've scorched my shorts?"

He caught hold of her roughly; they both began to laugh. Their laughing faded off into faint half-sighing sounds and finally silence as Lucia leaned her head on his shoulder while he supported almost entirely the weight of her slight body. He took from her the weight of her body; tired, tired, she leaned against him. While her eyes were open she was able to see the upward-slanting line of his jaw and how his hair grew too low. The hair

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

line, which should have been clean cut in a semicircle behind his ear, was overlapped with ragged darkness. Then her eyes closed and her fatigue dazzled her into unreality. She thought vaguely that if she could find the smallest pair of scissors she might carefully snip round his ear. . . . The voices of the children were very far away. Perhaps the nurse had them bathed and fed and in their beds. Perhaps in a moment Hilda would say that dinner was served; she and Clay would sit together at the freshly waxed table broken by sheer linen into squares and oblongs of dark and light.

She opened her eyes and they fell on the table. It was dull, and bare of anything more than a pale flecking of dust.

When it was time for the little boys' suppers Clay took them upstairs and gave them their baths in the same water.

"*Why* do I always have to have a bath with Johnnie?" said the bigger boy furiously as the small boy dug strong toes into his bare back.

"Because," Clay patiently explained, "we don't want to use more hot water than we must. Every time we turn on the hot water it makes the gadget in the cellar go, and every time that goes it costs money. We must spend as little as possible."

"'Cause you're home with us all the time?" the bigger boy asked, looking wisely into his father's serious face.

"That's it," Clay said shortly.

"Shame, Martie," Lucia said when they came downstairs in their clean pajamas.

"Shame for what?"

"Shame for pestering Daddy," she said indignantly. "I heard you."

She set on their table two identical bowls of cereal and two cups of milk. At an exact angle to the right of the bowls she methodically placed the dishes of prunes. Then she lighted the toaster and stood silently before it until it glowed warmly.

"This kitchen is too enormous," she told Clay. "A day in it is better than walking three times around the reservoir."

## COCKTAIL PARTY

"Your health should improve," he said gravely, tying Johnnie's bib. "Exercise is so fine for you."

"Prunes, prunes," the bigger boy chanted, viciously thrusting his spoon at one of the moist brown ovoids. "They're pretty wrinkled. I guess they're going to die pretty soon."

The little boy said immediately, "My prunes is so w'inkled they dead now-ow-ow." His voice went up and down on the last word, tauntingly.

Lucia glared at them over her shoulder as she cut the bread in thin slices. Her mouth turned up at its corners in amusement but she tried to pull it down in severity, so that the muscles quarreled with one another. The effect was a formidable expression, and the little boys, seeing it, hastily stuffed spoonfuls of cereal into their round red mouths.

Suddenly Clay cried in a loud whisper, "Good God, we've guests!"

Lucia bent her head and followed his glance through the door and out the dining-room window. Her eyes fell swiftly to the old blue smock she wore. She had been used to wearing it at the hospital where she had folded white gauze into surgical dressings and directed visitors to the wards in order to accumulate points for her Junior League work, but in the last few months it had adapted itself to the more serious milieu of the laundry. In a dozen spots it was scarred with starch and soapy stains.

Silently she thrust the bread knife toward Clay and, with a despairing gesture, ran out of the room. Heroic leaps up the stairs and a dash down the hall, and she was able to close her door on a harmony of bass and treble voices which sought out all the quiet corners of the house.

For a moment she stood irresolute, listening. Then she began rapidly to unbutton her smock. She stepped out of all her clothes and scrambled them into a handful which she threw into the hamper in her bathroom. On an impulse she was in and out of the shower before she had time to anticipate it. The cool water had turned her pale flesh blue. With a trembling hand and her face tipped close to the mirror, she painted crimson the wide thin

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

mouth, dashed color high on her cheeks, and drew back the soft waves of her untended fair hair with alternate tender movements of the comb and her fingers.

A wall of the room was solid with paneled mirrors. Lucia, with chilled fingers, slid one panel behind another. She stood gazing at her clothes with a thumb pressed to her cheek. She owned many lovely dresses; their colors were brilliant to her eyes as the world is dazzling after the confinement of a long illness, so that it was a relief to let her glance rest on the drabness of muslin slips covering evening gowns.

She took down gold crêpe pajamas. Her arm ached almost immediately because she held them high, out of reach of the dust she felt must coat the floor. When she was all ready, the ends of the jacket tied tight around her waist, she stood again before the mirror. A drop of amber perfume clung to the bottom of a big square bottle on her dressing table, and this she shook recklessly straight onto the crown of her head. A tiny bead of liquid was cool against her scalp where the hair was parted.

The two boys came upstairs, and she put them into their beds, flipped blanket ends beneath the mattresses with a fine dexterity, pulled down shades, and closed doors.

She walked thoughtfully down the beautifully shaped staircase.

Almost all of them were there. She couldn't begin to count them. They milled about in the living room and overflowed into the kitchen, cluttered with the débris from supper and filled with the fresh smell of her proud laundry. Their cars in the driveway were parked double and three deep, and the cocktail shakers they had brought stood tall and frosted on tables, and one of them made a pale aromatic circle on the shining wood of the piano.

They cried to her that they had all been having cocktails at Allison Gill's; that they had had this brainstorm and come right along to share them with Clay and Lucia. Lucia smiled at them a little stiffly and said that it had indeed been a brainstorm. She added vaguely that there were probably crackers somewhere in the house.

## COCKTAIL PARTY

"Don't *move!*" Allison cried to her. "This is my party entirely. Ted has a whole box full of canapés and the olives are all ready, wrapped in bacon." She took hold of Lucia's arm affectionately. "They're in your broiler this minute."

Then Lucia smelled the bacon and she began to feel a little better. She didn't ask where they were going afterward; she could guess from past experiences that it would be either the country club or a sort of speakeasy on the road to Boston. It had never been anything tremendously exciting, but the fact that she was not going with them cast a glamour over their activities, and she thought wistfully of a whole lobster and little crisp rolls and a big gleaming tureen of creamed soup from which a waiter with a perpetual crick in his back would obsequiously ladle great spoonfuls.

She accepted a cocktail from Stanley Clarke, whom she had once felt she knew very well. He told her that she was looking marvelous and that he had never seen the lawn and garden lovelier. Lucia knew he must have seen the For Sale sign which stood blatant in the center of the smooth green expanse; she stopped herself from saying that Clay now had lots of time to work with the flowers.

As soon as she had had two drinks she began desperately to want a cigarette. She had not had one for a month at least. That habit was gone; she had dispensed with it. Nevertheless, she reached out and idly opened a small cloisonné box. Empty. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. Stanley thrust before her an open leather case. There were exposed in it two long rows of perfect white cigarettes, and Lucia delightedly caught the faint scent of fresh tobacco. Her hand hesitated, hovered over the fine ovals. She looked about uncertainly and then with sudden firmness she selected one.

"Yes, I will, thank you," she said.

Gratefully she drew the smoke into her lungs. Slowly, slowly, she relinquished it, allowing it to escape from between her lips in the smallest possible wisps and curls. When the radiant tip was so close that it scorched her mouth Stanley, smiling, took it

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

from her fingers. He flipped open the leather case and again held it toward her.

She had two more cocktails from her own fragile glasses and she greedily smoked any number of cigarettes of which there appeared to be a wanton profusion. She talked entirely coherently to Allison Gill about hospital work.

Her eyes fixed on the open fronts of Allison's sandals through which the toenails ruddily gleamed, Lucia heard her own voice saying, "He took a long time to die. It's four months since I saw him in the hospital. I was sitting down, Allie, at the little desk in the hall, and there was a large bustling at the door and in he came in a wheel chair. All I can say is, he looked like death then. Afterwards I found his admission card and I saw that he had put himself down as a Presbyterian. I thought that was funny. Don't you think that's funny? His being a Presbyterian with one kidney gone and his liver just rigid with alcohol?"

She was rather surprised at her facile conversation and she was glad when Stanley Clarke came back to her. He had turned on the radio and she danced once around the room with him. In the intimacy of their embrace he gazed fondly down at her.

"You ought to come out more, Lucia," he said. "It's bad of you to keep away from us. *I* miss you terribly." His arm clasped her more closely and he added, "You're so *thin*, little Lucy."

She was wondering how much electricity the radio would consume; insanely she answered him. "Yes, I am. It's the hard, hard bending over the wash tubs as does it, mister, combined with the light fare."

He held his body away from her and looked into her face, shocked and curious. But he said nothing, and when they reached the group they had left he released her.

Soon afterward there was an exodus as concerted and rapid as had been the arrival.

Clay closed the door gently and turned to look at her. She sat apathetically on the arm of a chair. She didn't speak. After a

## COCKTAIL PARTY

moment she raised her head and searched the room with her eyes. She began to walk about hurriedly, thrusting her hand, swift and greedy, into the seats of the chairs. Nothing. Angrily she chose a long butt from an overflowing ashtray. The flame of the match made a sizzling sound against an escaped strand of hair.

She knew that the expression of pain and humility would be plain in Clay's eyes, so she did not look at him. But it made her angry to know that it was there.

She began to gather together all the small glasses left in unexpected places all over the room. Clay helped her; they carried them out to the kitchen where she arranged them on the shining porcelain table beside the sink. Then she put a big apron over her pajamas and as she brought from the refrigerator the butter, two eggs, two tomatoes, and a bowl of lettuce she said in a hard voice, "Nothing like a few cocktails to restore the languishing appetite."

That phrase "languishing appetite" was too funny to ignore and she laughed at it. Her laugh was as strained as the cry of a woman in labor. Suddenly she fixed on Clay her dark eyes, brilliant and febrile with the stimulation of the drinks.

"What do you say," she began rapidly, "to a good cup of that chicken broth Hilda used to mix with cream of mushroom soup? And little curled stems of celery and big ripe olives and crusty bread with slabs of sweet butter pressed against it? And then, dear," she continued in a cruel dreamy voice, "filet mignon a good three inches thick and the small tender hearts of artichokes shining in Hollandaise—"

Clay put his hand on her arm. It was a restraining gesture, and she saw that his eyes were frightened. He was afraid of what she might say, just as she was always afraid of what she might say. But something had momentarily pushed fear from her mind.

"And perhaps endive with the chopped egg and Roquefort dressing. Here are the eggs—exactly two—the very eggs for it. We have lettuce, too. Of course," she said, poking with a dis-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

dainful finger at the lettuce in the bowl, "one might say that this lettuce was just a *trifle*—er—desiccated—"

She saw Clay's face from the corner of her eye. She saw him half turn as though to go out of the room, turn back, and with bent head cut the butter into two small pats which he balanced with a knife as he transferred them to bread-and-butter plates. His whole manner so enraged her that she crashed the bowl of lettuce onto the porcelain table. Half a dozen little glasses bounced into the air and smashed with a pretty musical sound.

When he heard the noise of the breaking glass, he straightened and put his hand to his face.

Lucia went to him. She pushed aside the butter and pulled herself onto the shelf. First she kissed Clay's mouth and then she smoothed his head as it lay against her breast.

"Never mind, my baby," she said softly. "Never you mind."



## The Roundhouse\*

JOHN KEMMERER

*John Kemmerer is another product of Iowa, the state that turns out authors as well as crops. He was educated at Grinnell, Harvard, and Columbia. His work has appeared in many publications, including The American Caravan and Copy.*

THE big bright accurate alarm clock clanged like a warning gong at a railroad crossing. It was five o'clock again, in the afternoon of a hot summer Sunday. Without really waking up, moving by habit in the hazy late light, Al rolled out, took a bath, and shaved.

When he was done, the backs of his lean hands were still gray, and his fingernails were outlined in blue. His eyelashes and his level eyebrows, high in his long, hollow face, still contained some fine particles of soot. And his face, in spite of the shaving and the gritty soap, remained the peculiar pale grayish-white of the roundhouse men who worked on the night shift.

He put on a white shirt and his good clothes, and went downstairs to breakfast. His mother had bought coffee-cake, cooked new apples from the farm, fried some eggs, and made coffee. Though she was an old country woman, and not used to living in town, she could see that this meal, coming about supper time, was really Al's breakfast. She was pleased that she could understand the situation, and always got him breakfast just before she got supper for her husband and herself.

But after a hearty breakfast Al had a whole evening to kill. He could walk uptown, find another union man, and play a

\*From *Hound & Horn*, Spring, 1931. Reprinted by permission of *Hound & Horn*.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

game of pool. He could stay at home, spread his pencils on a table, and draw pictures of whatever came into his head. Sometimes he made cartoons of snoopy foremen, sometimes he designed luxurious roadsters with very long wheelbases, at other times he tried to draw curly-haired little hussies that he had seen on the street; he never succeeded with anything except the automobiles. Or he could listen to the radio or play his phonograph.

When he thought of walking six blocks uptown, he felt dead tired. He was too listless even to sharpen a pencil to draw with. He was tired all the time. Though his family told him that he was in the prime of life and ought to be feeling fine, he did not have steam enough to do anything besides work and sleep. Yet he could not sleep well. He had never grown used to sleeping in the daytime. In the evening, when he got up, his eyeballs ached, his throat was sore, his joints cracked, and he felt as though he had never slept at all.

He sat on the back porch until after supper and after sundown. In his father's little garden the thick green tomato vines turned greenish black; through the alley the neighbor's cat stole along looking straight ahead; here and there in the twilight some children were calling to one another, very clearly; the hot air became still and damp; and presently over the garden a few lightning-bugs began to appear, gleaming at intervals in unexpected places, like tiny flashes of heat lightning, just as the lightning-bugs used to appear in the country, glimmering over the low misty hayfields and the pastures, and in the dark leafy tunnels in the cornfields.

At last he dragged into the house, into the bright empty living room, and wound up his phonograph. It was an old Edison machine that played cylindrical records, and the records were old, too. He put on a German piece and sat in a hard rocker beside the machine to listen. The needle crackled through the blank grooves, and then from the fluted cabinet, from the concealed horn, from Berlin or some American laboratory, came a slow stately violin-and-bell beginning of *The Blue Danube*

## THE ROUNDDHOUSE

*Waltz*, and as the waltz proceeded calmly and proudly, Al stared without seeing at the ugly brown wallpaper before him, sat motionless, his face like gray cast iron, listening, not thinking, not remembering. He heard the notes of the music, and the hum of the wheels and the governor, the scratching of the sapphire needle.

The little machine, one of Edison's greatest inventions, a triumph of progress, ground on steadily. But only at ten, when the whistle of the eastbound express sounded from the other side of town, did Al begin to wake up. His eyes brightened, and with workmanlike movements he stowed the phonograph and the records away in a corner. He went upstairs and changed into his work clothes, a black shirt, greasy overalls and jacket, heavy shoes, an engineer's cap, a blue handkerchief around his neck to keep the cinders from going down. When he appeared in the bright living room again, a man tall, swarthy, oily black, rectangular, indifferent but able, mindless but cunning, he strode through all ready for work, his heart and lungs idling, his long arms waiting to reach out, up, down.

He took his dinner pail, left home, and walked up the track of another railroad toward the roundhouse. He passed dark quiet cottages, the depot with one light in the ticket office, a silent lumberyard, and the gas tanks that supplied the town. Then, for a few hundred yards, the track ran on a high embankment between grass and truck gardens. For a few minutes he walked through something like the country again. Below in the darkness, in the sweet-corn that he would see on his return in the morning, the long rank leaves, stirred by a faint wind, rustled against one another softly and mysteriously, so penetratingly that anyone passing could not help wondering what they were saying, why they were whispering.

At the crossing he turned west and following a path on the hot gravel between the tracks, steadily approached the slate-colored roundhouse, which looked something like a prairie coal mine or a distant view of Chicago. Ahead of him at different points burned the red, green, and yellow signals of the sema-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

phores; at the roundhouse the floodlights shone on the tops of box-cars, the dead locomotives, the maze of clear tracks, a small black mark that was a workman; in the yard a switch engine butted box-cars this way and that, making up a freight train, meanwhile blowing off steam in a woolly cloud. He could hear dully, could feel, the dynamos spinning in the invisible powerhouse, and the beating of the horizontal slow-speed engines there. And from the starry sky the scattered smoke was already falling in a rain of soot and fine cinders.

He hurried on between two sidings of freight-cars, a dim stifling alley, and soon reached a corner of the roundhouse, where some stunted burdocks were growing up among a pile of car wheels. He went to the once whitewashed locker room, spoke to the time clerk just before twelve, got a pair of gloves, locked up the dinner pail, and went out in front of the hissing roundhouse to see what there was to do. The turntable was empty, and so were the tracks radiating from it to the stalls, a semicircle of twenty open doors. The high dazzling blue-white floodlights, which defined even the threads of the bolts in the rails, seemed to be lighting up a deserted yard. But in the gigantic stalls the engines stood back-end out, like circus elephants at supper, patient and important; and steam escaped continuously, tools clanked and tapped, and under the drop-lights scurried the blackened half-naked mechanics and their helpers, cleaning, inspecting, and repairing the engines for the next run.

Al was a hostler's helper. He had only one thing to do. When a hostler took a clean engine out to a train crew that was going to make a run, Al went along from the roundhouse to a stand-pipe and the coal station and saw that the tender was filled with water and coal. In winter he saw that the engine's sandboxes were filled. Sometimes he brought a dirty engine back through the yard to the ashpits or the roundhouse. If there was no engine to go out, he sat around and waited for one. At such times, especially in rainy and cold weather, he waited at the little shed at the center of the hundred-foot turntable. In the shed, which was the size, the shape, and the odor of an outhouse, there were

## THE ROUNDHOUSE

an electric light on a cord, a stove, the control box of the turntable, and the old operator. On warm nights Al and the old man sat on a shelf-like bench in front of the shed as comfortably as they could. One of them watched for the outbound engines and the other for the inbound engines.

Al went out to the bench again and sat down by the old man. The night was hot, still, and gaseous, and in a distant bunk-car a Mexican section hand who could not sleep was playing a guitar and singing sadly of love. And this alien song, drifting into the yard after midnight, coming in between the clank of tools and through the perpetual escape of steam, made the flood-lights bring out the track on the turntable more sharply than usual, every speck of new fallen soot on the worn bright rails, the cedar ties as black as if charred. The old man said, "How are ye this evenin'," and went on chewing. He was small and wizened, with a grizzly beard; and his clothes, his flat cap, his grimy jacket and overalls, seemed to have shrunk along with him. A few years ago he had always been ready to talk about himself or the railroad, but now he was not. And in some way, either from his short remarks, or from the gossip that circulated mysteriously and quickly through the yard, Al had heard why the old man had become so silent. There were two reasons. He had been demoted, because of his age, from hostler to turntable operator. He had never been anything more than a hostler, but that position had satisfied him, and he had taken the loss of it pretty hard. Then, just as he was recovering, and saying philosophically that we all got to give in a little bit sometime, his youngest daughter, a lively girl of sixteen, had gone out with a passing Army man, during the War, and presently had had a squalling little soldier in the house. After that event the old man had looked glum for a long time, and he did not talk very much any more. And where once he was always trying to give away a chew of his special plug, a mixture of cheap tobacco and dried peaches, tough as shoe leather, tasting first like peaches and then like fire, now he seldom offered it to anyone, but took a chew himself, wrapped the plug up again in

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

a clean handkerchief, and, all hunched over, looked at the flashing rails in front of him until he heard an engine coming.

Before long one came. A bell rang in the roundhouse and a freight engine backed slowly out toward the turntable. The old man, jerking the lever on the control box, set the long table turning around in its pit to join the right track. Al walked along the table and with his gloved hand signalled the hostler. The engine rolled onto the table. "Track Five," said the hostler, leaning out of the cab, and Al shouted at the old man, "Track Five." The table turned and stopped at the track, and as the engine rolled forward toward town, Al grabbed a handhold and swung on.

He rode the fireman's seat as far as the standpipe and then clambered up over the tender to the water tank at the rear. The engine stopped with the tank under the projecting spout of the standpipe. Standing on his toes, Al reached up and pulled down the big eighteen-inch iron spout, pulling against the counterweights, and shoved it into the hole in the tank. He opened a valve and the water poured down. In a few minutes the five-thousand-gallon tank was full and the water was rushing over his shoes, all over the rounded deck, making it slippery. Closing the valve, he flung the spout upward. The engine was already going on toward the coal station, a high black block-like building.

It stood a hundred feet away, and inefficiently slowed up the fueling. A minute later the engine stopped with the tender under a wooden chute. Pulling at the short counterweighted chute, as he had pulled at the water spout, struggling with the wide cumbersome thing, Al brought it down and fastened it to the tender. Then he crawled up on a side of the fixed chute and raised a gate that dammed back the coal. The heavy chunks slid down into the iron tender with a banging rumble. From them rose a cloud of coal dust that blackened him quickly, grew muddy in his sweat, came in with his breath and coated his nose passages, his throat, and his lungs. The dust from ten tons of coal rose past him, and then the chunks were falling off onto

## THE ROUNDHOUSE

the ground, where a critical office man would see them in the morning. Al stood on the gate, jumped on it, and forced it shut. Then he slid down the chute, pushed it up, and scrambled off the back of the moving tender.

Running eastward, the freight engine passed the caboose of its train, lighted up the cars ahead, box-cars, flat-cars, cattle-cars, tank-cars, and gondolas, gray, grimy red or yellow, Rock Island, Southern Pacific, Standard Oil, and Lehigh Valley, and at a distance became small, passing smaller cars, until it stopped at the front end of the line, near the station, almost a mile away. And there, behind blinding white headlights, a clean locomotive was replacing the dirty one on the westbound express, a crack Chicago-Denver train, during the short stop. Al turned back toward the roundhouse. Over the ashpits a recently arrived engine was standing, having the fire and clinkers knocked out of its firebox. Niggers dressed to the ears to keep the heat off banged away with long pokers and called to each other drunkenly.

Before he had reached the turntable, the fresh express locomotive, hurling up sparks like skyrocket, hauling its string of pullman cars as if they were nothing, roared west on the main line, on the two-hundred-mile run to Omaha. The exhausts went crash crash crash, the piston-rod shot in and out, the great drivers with new gray rims whirled onward, the yard shook and smoked with dust uneasily rising. And then the racing windows of the pullman cars sped by all dark, for hundreds of passengers were trying to sleep, while only in the last car, the palatial observation car, the lights and the giltwork shone, business men in cool expensive suits sat smoking cigars, and girls in white and immodest frocks leaned back in armchairs languidly.

The crack train passed, and through the rising dust, over a siding of dim freight-cars, Al saw that in the southwest the sky was glowing and quivering with continual flashes of heat lightning. It played there weirdly, now bright, now faint, and at moments outlined the sullen rectangular shape of a box-car. In

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

just that way, on a summer night in the country, the heat lightning had outlined at the horizon the distant round leafy groves, illuminating them greenly and wonderfully, so that when he was a boy he had stayed up late alone to watch them. He had walked, cool and clean, the soles of his feet pressing the soft earth, down the dark lane between two fields of hay, which smelled ripe.

But now the early morning, the two o'clock rush, had begun. Behind the floodlights, on the roof of the roundhouse, dense coal smoke crowded out of the semicircle of smokejacks, coming from the engines down below. From the enormous doors three clean engines backed out toward the turntable. They closed in, their wheels still slowly backed, they waited, hissing. The long turntable lumbered back and forth in its circular pit. The old operator, peering out of the dull windows of his shed, monkey-like, chewing ferociously, yanked the worn control lever this way and that, became dizzy, sweat till he stank. The hostlers' helpers, Al among them, trotted in from different directions, ran around the pit to get to the engines. Nearing them, the helpers paused to signal, and their blackened and glistening faces shrank smaller than a space between four rivets in the double rows of rivets in the tenders' high steel sides. Out at the ashpits, meanwhile, the dirty engines were tied up on the inbound tracks. Hot as furnaces, reeking of burnt oil and coal, deserted by everyone, they waited in line to have their fires and clinkers knocked out. The first engines in sagged the rails over the pits, and the drunk niggers there, scorched by the heat, cursed by the gang boss, yelled and pounded the redhot fireboxes furiously. In the power plant back of the roundhouse the night foreman strolled to a wall of shining dials and studied them; a young man, pale but strong, a hostler risen from the ranks, overbearing yet with a knack of licking the right boots, he throve on hard work, low pay, even on coal gas; meeting Al in the yard, he would say, first looking around to see that other men were not listening, though in the racket of iron and steam no one could have overheard, "You need to be more ambitious, like



## THE ROUNDHOUSE

myself." Now he spoke to a bald mechanic, an old railroad man, who obediently started up an idle horizontal engine, which had been polished till it glittered. The engine started softly, pulling a new dynamo, coal fed automatically into the fireboxes of the boilers, from the row of powerhouse chimneys smoke fell in a grim sulphurous fog, more electric current flowed to the motors in the railroad well. Instantly the reserve pumps there, lifting and thumping, began to pour more water into the main supply tank, to try to build up the pressure in the standpipes, up inch by inch, for the outbound engines were drinking the well dry. And now a huge two-hundred-ton one-thousand-horsepower locomotive, coming out ponderously, delicately, its steam singing, its linked drivers revolving slowly together, its white and black paint all fresh, its rods wiped bright, its massive bearings dripping clean oil, for the early Denver-Chicago express, backed haughtily toward the turntable, and Al had to run to watch the table and see that its rails made a joint with the track. Now he climbed up on the monstrous tender, which was twice as high and long as the last one; pulled down the iron spout of a standpipe again; fought with a coal chute that was too heavy for him; panting, breathed in the dust being ground by the tumbling coal; dropped off the rear end of the tender as it departed. And as the locomotive rolled away toward town, running quickly under the green signals, to wait for the Denver-Chicago express that now far in the west, in the sultry night, on the smooth solid double-track road, was approaching the Chicago-Denver express and soon would pass it with a flash and a roar, Al turned back, coughed and spat black spit, and jogged along in the loose cinders toward the glare of the roundhouse, where because new engines were firing up, the smoke fell past the lurid floodlights more and more darkly.

## Drought\*

PHIL STONG

*Phil Stong, the well-known contemporary novelist, is another Iowan. He attended Drake, the University of Kansas, and Columbia. Since his college years he has been athletic director, high school teacher, editorial writer, instructor in journalism, wire editor for the Associated Press, copy editor for the North American Newspaper Association, a member of the editorial staff of Liberty, and editor and publisher with the late New York World, all in the space of a few years. This whirlwind personality is now giving his entire time to fiction writing. His recent novels, State Fair, Stranger's Return, Village Tale, and Week End, have had wide popularity.*

### I

THE river seemed hardly to move. It had been thinned, exhausted, until its ribs showed in every gravel bank and sand bar. In the spring it swept down to the Mississippi, spanning a good half mile from bank to bank; now, it was a fetid pond, a moist trickle of scum which drifted almost imperceptibly between the scorched hills. Catfish and carp, trapped in its dead capillaries, smothered and stank, and the stench was feeble.

Close to the river, in one of the few patches of lawn left between the green, deep-rooted willows, Devon Craig lay on Cass Leddering's arm and looked at the sky. It was the hour before supper and there was still a little mesh of sunlight through

\* From *Redbook Magazine*, December, 1934. Reprinted by permission of Phil Stong and *Redbook Magazine*.

## DROUGHT

the willow leaves, but though they were only a dozen yards from the dusty road, they were quite concealed by the sharp bench of the river bank.

The willows were strangely lopped of their small branches. An hour before Cass had finished cutting the day's ration of twigs for the cattle; had bathed himself and his dust-crusts in the river and stuck his ax vertically into the first tree of the next day's trimming. Pleasantly soapy, and more or less accurately combed, he had stretched himself out on this little fresh plot to wait for her. In these merciless days of more than a hundred degrees of midday heat, no one expected and no one could endure the ordinary twelve hours of labor.

The Leddering ice, from the winter cutting, had been gone for days and the Craig ice would soon be gone, but while it lasted Devon lavished it on Cass. There was nothing skimpy about the Craigs. They had grace, a kind of Scotch delicacy, but they were sturdy and generous and no one knew better than Cass—nor one-millionth so well—how far that promise was borne out in their hearts.

So he had not been surprised when a cool, moist handkerchief ran over his closed eyes and damp brow, and her voice, rich in the low register, quiet and strong, asked, "Tired, Cass, child?"

He opened his eyes slowly to sip at her downbent face. One did not gulp wine like that. The eyes which would, by God, always be a happy young girl's eyes—somehow dark and warm now, with affection, with an utterly unreasonable solicitude for him which gave him a deep, uninterpretable urge to valiance and loyalty; her dark, full color, the soft wave of her brown hair—all a soft, twilight, devoted loveliness. Next to her concern for his tired hulk of stiffening muscle, the invariable good humor of her face touched him most. Had she been a Christian martyr she would have scratched the lions behind the ears.

That feeling, and his conviction that she must be led to confine her caresses to less dangerous animals, accounted for many things between Cass Leddering and Devon Craig.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"You've got a smudge of dust on your chin—at the left—just below the dimple—oh! so you know where the dimple is!"

"Who hasn't got a smudge of dust this summer?" she asked with dignity. She touched her face with her handkerchief and then ran her fingers down his cheeks.

He had had to speak of the smudge because he had to say something gruff and male. He was tired to death. He had been cutting enough light willow branches to keep the cattle, all day—chopping from the ground with his ax, climbing the trees to cut upper branches with his hatchet. Then the hired man came and raked them up behind him and they pitched them in a wagon and fed them to the cattle. When men starve they can eat grass and when cattle starve they can nibble the leaves and soft twigs of willow. The cattle and the brave men of this Iowa country broke his heart every day. The cattle grew thin without seeming anxious and the men fed them weeds and twigs with an over-elaborate carelessness—a "here, old fellow, here's something new I'm sure you'll like much better than the old hay and corn"—and the cattle showed their thoroughbred quality by pretending that it was quite all right.

The farm was denuded. The six hundred acres had produced a trifle of green corn forage, twenty-one bushels of wheat, a ton or so of alfalfa. There was no pasture—the hills were dead and brown and would have to be plowed to corn in the spring because the grass roots had died. Four hundred acres of dead grass. Trees a hundred years old dying. No pleasant, comic cry of important bullfrogs from the caked mud of the ponds or long dried springs.

The pigs were plebeian—they rooted in the dust until their noses were dry, with obvious discontent, and whoofed with contempt at the mudhole which was painfully created by hauling barrels of water from the river every morning. They had to be kept cool if they were to flourish—though they weren't worth anything. Even the chickens, with their pin-sized brains, scratched at the loose earth dutifully but cynically. They knew this was not worm country.

## DROUGHT

"I brought lemonade."

That was a fiction that they understood. She poured out a purple drink into the cup of the vacuum bottle—grapejuice and blackberry juice with water, since no farmer in that Iowa County was going to be silly enough to pay  $3\frac{1}{2}$  cents for a lemon. The battered, ridiculous, tin cylinder was covered with cold sweat. The bottle was not very efficient but that was quite as well because it enabled her to gather the cool dew for his forehead on her handkerchief. However, any cold beverage made from fruits was "lemonade."

Cass considered the drink with a little indecision. If he took a long drink of warmish water from the jug first the lemonade wouldn't taste as good; if he drank the lemonade first, he'd drink it right down without appreciating the flavor.

"Go ahead," she urged, mysteriously aware, as always, of his conflicts. "There's a whole bottleful. Go ahead, Cass."

He drank the cup off and she poured another. He waved it aside.

"It's your turn."

"No, sweet, I had a lot up at the house. You've worked hard and you're not used to it."

He drank the second cup and, as she would have poured a third into the shabby little container, he reached up, lazily and lightly, and grasped her wrists. "Not now, not just before supper—in a minute. Don't want to cool off my stomach too fast with supper coming."

His fingers tightened. He was a tan blond—the sun could not permanently affect the cool gray of his eyes and the lightness of his skin, like old pine. Admiring and adoring the lean, thoughtful face, she tried to loosen her hands to lie down near him. He clung to her arms and stopped her for a moment.

He looked up again at her face, loved it and enjoyed it. It was warm as always but steady, not flushed. His fingers, the trained fingers of a surgeon, relaxed slowly and loosed her.

"Your pulse is—funny," he said. "You been much out in the sun to-day?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"No," she said, and she smiled with pride at his wisdom which she recognized in two swift gestures of his hands and his glance. He must be a very good doctor.

They lay very quietly with her head on his arm and her arm holding his head to her shoulder. The evening breeze came up the river so tempered by the water that it seemed cool. They heard the softly reproachful remarks of the hired man as he opened the Creek gap and was disappointed again by the undignified eagerness of the cattle to get to the river water. The heifers snuffled the water and drank deep and audibly. They trod in the mud and munched the coarse weeds and reedy snake grass.

"Hee-yoh, there," the hired man directed. "Come out of there, you sotten ol' fool. You mire down this next time, I'm lettin' you stay. Ain't you ever goin' to know that there mud bed? Hee-yoh! Up'n outta here. Yoh! Yoh up!"

They slugged up the muddy creek mouth at a funeral pace and their hoofs struck dully on the dried black earth beyond. Heath, the hired man, continued to shout at them as if they were rambunctious, fat-fed creatures. Occasionally, to please him, they tossed their heads and pretended to trot out of hand. Then the skin rubbed up and down their ribs.

"Only a high-bred man and a high-bred cow could do that," Cass said gravely. "He won't let on in front of them and they won't let on in front of him. Damn it."

"Cass!"

"Sorry, Devil." Since her name was Devon he called her Devil—she even referred to herself as Devil—in their nearest moments. He picked up a willow leaf that had blown down from his day's cutting. There was some juice in it but the flavor was high and mouldy—the flavor which even the freshest willow leaves take from alluvium.

"They've got to eat that."

She lifted his fingers to her heart for a moment. "They'll eat it." She smiled with quiet confidence in these other stoics. "I've got to go now, Cass. Your Dad'll be up from the mail in a minute. I suppose you won't go back to Des Moines right away?"

## DROUGHT

"I'm sorry I swore." She smiled and he smiled. "When I leave you another time you'll know about it."

"Don't worry about it. I'd like to know, that's all." She had a good one-sided smile. "I've done on—willow leaves."

"Not again—not again!"

She hardly touched his hand as she went up the steep bank. The fibre of the Craigs was hard; they could do with their circumstances without interrupting the continuing grace of their postures, or leaning on anyone.

### II

Aside from his one mildly reprehensible peculiarity—Sid Leddering was a Democrat—there wasn't a steadier farmer in Van Buren County than Cass Leddering's father. One could easily see this by his moustache which hung far down in a depressed handlebar style on each side of his thin, eloquent mouth. Any Democrat in Van Buren County, Iowa, is certain to be eloquent by the time he is fifty-five.

More significant than these two impressive stabilizers of whisker were his blue-gray eyes and the cheerfully curious arch of the thin, sandy brows above them. Sid Leddering had never been rich and he had hardly been poor; he waited in this median stage, hopefully, for some development. Brunswick was proud of him, in a somewhat patronizing fashion, for he had put his son through medical school, which proved that farmers could put their sons through medical schools, though none of the rest of them chose to behave in this eccentrically extravagant fashion.

"Good news from Des Moines?" the Postmaster in the little country grocery inquired. He had seen the hospital letterhead on Cass's letter, of course. The farmers who had come in for their mail were straggling out but those who remained paused for a moment.

"Don't know—have to wait till Cass opens it. Probably be tellin' him to come on back." Sid sighed.

"Mighty good worker, that boy," Colin Craig said, reluctantly

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

acknowledging that a college graduate could be a good farm worker.

"I don't know what I'd've done without him, this summer," Sid said slowly, and did not add that he did not know what he would do without him now.

Condensing his interruption to the customary brevity of country compliments, Devon's father went on with his argument. "You think God don't notice when you kill bearin' sows and cut down your corn plantin', you're crazy. Why's it the dryest year since weather bureau? I can tell you in one word—Franklin Delano Roosevelt."

"That's three words," someone, quite in agreement with the speaker, objected automatically.

"It's one name. What God gaveth God'll take away mighty quick if you don't use it the way He intended. Leavin' good corn ground for cockle-burrs!"

"I seeded my corn contract down to clover," Sid remonstrated. "It needed a rest, anyway, and the morning glories cleaned out."

Colin snorted. "A lot o' clover you got, even if you could've cut it under the contract."

"Well, the field got the rest and the morning glories are cleaned out—just as dead as the clover. I tell you, Colin Craig," he added, mildly, "if you're goin' to bring Divinity into this argument, I'll add my own little slocum—"Thank God this drought didn't happen to the farmer while the Republicans was in."

He gathered up his bundles before he looked at his antagonist again. "I can run you up to your house."

"Thanks, Sid." The grizzled, sturdy old man went out to the car.

The storekeeper coughed at Sid. He said in a low voice, "Say, Sid, I ain't dunnin' you after thirty years of dealin' between you and me, but the jobbers are kind of on me—everybody's runnin' up bills—and if you just happened to have a little spot of money on hand you didn't need—your credit's just as good as ever, understand, and I hope you won't think it's a dun—"

For a bare instant the dim, ragged brows drooped and the



## DROUGHT

hopefulness wavered. Sid fished into his pocket and produced a silver dollar and less than a dollar in small change. "You're welcome to the dollar, for the time bein', Oss."

His creditor suggested that the jobbers would never be the subjects of God's grace, and the following phrase stated that he approved of their consequent destiny.

"Where's your oysters?" Oss asked fiercely.

In the fairly good days when Sid and Lyd' were first married they had formed the genteel and elegantly luxurious habit of eating a can of Cove Oysters, with pepper sauce, with crackers, for Sunday night supper, sitting together in the decorous early-nuptial intimacy and awe which is more sacred than virginal privacy. Lyd' had been dead ten years but Sid had preserved the custom, even when oysters went to fourteen cents.

For a moment the beaten face, deep-tanned with forty summers under the hard sun, quivered and worked. Then the brows returned to their ordinary ingenuous cheerfulness.

"I just got to thinkin', Oss—I don't really need them oysters."

In a flash Oss remembered old days—the time when the farm hands dropped in, Saturday nights, and ate cheese and crackers and then made the hard choice between a can of tomatoes, or a can of oysters, or a can of pears or peaches, for the indulgence of the evening—all the canned stuff was ten cents then. He virtually threw the oysters at Sid—everything couldn't go to Hell, even if the country did.

"You'll take them blankety-blank oysters and you'll like them, Sid Leddering, and don't say a blankety word, and get out. No Leddering's went back on a bill in ninety years and it's about time even if anything happened."

"Thanks, Oss—and—thanks, Oss."

"You got plenty of crackers?" Oss inquired violently.

### III

"The question ain't that," Sid told Colin soberly as the 1925 model yanked and yodelled across the Creek bridge. "I wouldn't give the place up. But if Cass can get me this watching man job

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

in the hospital I could get somebody to winter the cattle and come back for spring plantin' with two dimes to jingle."

"That's a lie, Sid," Colin said quietly. "I know what's in your mind. Once you get in Des Moines the Land Bank'll have your farm in no time and you'll never come back. And at our age, Sid, you'll never get used to workin' on a job where somebody always tells you what to do."

"Well, it can cost a man too much to be independent—"

"No, it can't," Colin said firmly.

"Well, maybe it can't—I didn't say I was goin'—but I just can't bear to sit and see the heifers suffer." He was silent for a moment and then confessed his shame. "You know what happened to me this evening? Oss told me the jobbers was pressin' him for money and I didn't have any money to pay my bill."

There was a moment's silence. Colin said softly, "Oss mentioned something like that to me about two weeks ago. I didn't have nothing, either."

They drove on between the rustling rows of dead roadside weeds. The dust seemed to anticipate the coming of the car and coated anew their sweat-soaked hickory shirts and built up the dirty furrows in their faces. Dust and sweat and the hot sky and the racked groaning of the car, shouting of past poverty and famine to come, seemed to fill full the measure of God's pitilessness.

"I ain't going to stand it any longer," Sid said, with sudden and evidently irrevocable determination. "I don't have to. The Land Bank can have the farm. I'll sell the heifers to them that can feed them or'll put 'em out of their misery. It's just plain sentimental foolish to hang on to land that won't keep you—"

"It's kept you."

"—just because your folks and your folks' folk had it—and it's cruel. What right have we got," he asked bitterly, "to ask them to go through all this just on the chance we can pull them through?"

"It's you complainin'—not them."

## DROUGHT

"I know—but it's sentimental foolish." He liked the phrase. "I'm goin'."

"I'll hate to see you go," Colin said quietly as he got off at his lane.

"Besides," Sid said lamely, "Cass's all I got and he's a doctor. He won't need no farm."

This struck Colin. "That's so. Seems a pity. But you never know when you might want a farm."

### IV

Cass and Sid had washed and wiped the supper dishes and Sid, sitting on the front steps, was about equally engaged in trying to work a catfish bone from between his teeth with his tongue, and packing his pipe with a variety of guncotton known as "Miners' and Farmers'" which defiantly advertised that it was "A fine smoking mixture—made of the choicest tobaccos." It sold for about twenty-five cents a pound and lasted a long, long time.

It was definitely cooler. It was so cool, in the low nineties, that Cass looked hopefully at the sky. "If the weather ever changed," he said, "I'd say it was about to change."

"If it did, me too," his father said, economically.

"Oh, thunderations," he added. "It's *bound* to change—I say it's *bound* to change. It always does."

He was more comfortable than he cared to admit. "Cass," he said suddenly, "can you get catfish in Des Moines—good catfish?"

"I guess so, Dad. Why'd you ask?"

Sid stared thoughtfully down the long slope to the river from which a warm but not unpleasant evening breeze had sprung up. He had stared down that slope and across to the hills almost every evening for fifty-five years. He knew he had because his Ma must have nursed him either here on the porch in the evening, or else in the parlor, with its big bay window. The Church Tree, near the river edge, fed its green leaves with roots that had prepared for this drought for two centuries.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

His family had been here for one of them.

He shrugged his shoulders. Once he made up his mind, he made up his mind. He rose and went to his rocking chair. He liked to rock even though a tradition had lately grown up in Brunswick that it was not considered exactly polite by the best people. Heck with the best people. He couldn't worry about what they did in Newport and the Biltmore and those places. They could rock or set, just as they darn pleased. Why'd the ayleet *have* rockers if they didn't use them?

Cass had forgotten his question. "I got a letter this evening."

Sid looked up slowly. He had delivered the letter so that that was no surprise but the faint bitterness of his son's tone was a surprise. "You going back?"

The young man spoke slowly and carefully, a clinical habit which gave good presage for his future as a doctor. "I might as well tell you, Dad, there was a reason why I got this summer's leave of absence."

Sid puzzled at this. "But you were doin' good—they couldn't have let you out." He bristled. "If they did it's plenty good enough for them." He shook his head and smiled shrewdly and comfortingly, his own intentions forgotten. "Couldn't spare you from here, anyhow. Doc Sherrell over in Pittsville's gettin' mighty old—I bet you could help me out a while and then buy in to help him mighty cheap—mighty cheap. I got an oak piece—" he waved aside his son's attempted interruption—"the Rock Island's been tryin' to buy the timber off of for ever since the war started—"

"They didn't let me out, Dad. They let a lot of the boys out but they're keeping me—on half-pay."

Sid calculated swiftly. "Twelve dollars and a half a week and your meals! I wish I could earn twelve dollars and a half a week and my keep—" He threw back his shoulders vigorously. "I tell you, Cass, I just decided to-day—"

"That isn't all of it, Dad."

The older man paused again at his tone.

"Part of the rest of it is that Devon and I are married, Dad."

## DRUGHT

Sid's mouth opened and shut once or twice and then he seized his son's hand. "Well—well—that's fine! Me and that damned old standpatter Colin used to talk about you two bein' married—that was before you went away to school." He turned his head away for a moment. "I'd of kind of liked to of been there, Cass, if you don't mind me sayin' so, 'cause your Ma would of liked to of been and so I would of."

"We were married before I went away to school, Dad—"

"Huh!"

The young man bowed his head. "We were in love and we were kids. We thought everybody'd say we were too young. So the day before I went to Iowa U. we sneaked off in the car."

"But you ain't said anything till now."

Cass nodded. "We wrote and pretty soon we didn't write. It looked like it would be all right to let it drift until one of us wanted to get divorced on some account—"

"Divorced? Huh!" The young man's father pulled his moustache. "You—you didn't want to stay married, you mean? You didn't even see each other—oh, you mean you just kind of forgot—"

Cass's voice, when he was apologetic, always reminded Sid of the time he had caught his son throwing rotten eggs at the pigs from the barn window. "*We* didn't forget, Dad. I did and she pretended to. I had to see her again to remember—when I first got home this summer." He said, with a certain contempt and bitterness for himself, "You see, a wife is just a stumbling block in a young doctor's way."

"Umm." Sid sat for a moment remembering things which had happened before this boy was born. The hard times when once he had happened to think that one mouth is easier to feed than two—just for a second but it was one of those cursed thoughts that never grow dimmer in the soul and return, sharp as a knife, at the worst moment—for instance, when your son's mother is dying of some strange eating at the breast that fed the boy. This must be swept over, erased from Cass's mind.

"Huh-uh," he murmured, with interested, rather than amused,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

laughter. "The way things turn out! Now there you go and think you ain't in love with Devon any more, and then you get your first vacation since you started workin' through school and you see her again, and then you find out you was right all the time, and this time you find out for sure—"

"Yes, Dad," Cass said in a low voice, "this time for sure."

"Of course, for sure," Sid said heartily. "A man don't make a mistake about that more'n once—I mean, a man like us." His mind worked at desperate speed. Watching men got fifteen dollars; fifteen and twelve and a half—gosh, a fortune, and Cass with his keep—

"I tell you, son," old Sid said, and let his fingers wander behind him, as they had wandered ten thousand times, over the soft, uneven, homemade brick of the house wall. The luxurious four-room block of the Leddering mansion had been added to the frame rooms in 1852. "I tell you," he continued slowly and stopped. That was the hand-wrought nail Pa had stuck in the mortar to see how long it would last. It had lasted.

"There's one other thing, Dad."

Sid didn't pay much attention. Everything certainly worked out fine. Devon could keep house for them. They'd come back every summer and see that the farm was running right—. Sid forced from his mind the certain knowledge that if the farm's meager profits were divided with a renter, next March would see it in the hands of the Joint Land Bank. What if it did? They'd be making out.

"The other thing," Cass said gently, "is that Devon's going to have a baby."

It was an instant before the thunder of crashing projects quieted in Sid's brain. Then he seized his son by the shoulders and shook him soundly. "No, now! You an' Devon! Why, you son-of-a-gun, you! Like as not a boy, too—they're mighty often boys—w'y, I'll be shot for a horse-thief—"

Then he chuckled at a sudden thought. "Wait till that danged old G.O.P. 'er hears about this. Jus' promise me one thing, Cass—

## DROUGHT

that baby's got to be brung up in the bosom of the Democratic party."

"Dad," Cass said, considering very carefully, "I think we could get you that job up at the hospital. I think if we managed mighty hard, the three of us—and four—could make out somehow—"

Sid regarded his son with startled incredulity. "An' let the place go to the Land Bank?" He tried to glower at his son. "That baby comes from good farm stock on both sides. That baby might need a farm."

### V

They met in the darkness under the willows, the darkness that was good and hid the ugliness of decay and despair all about them. Occasionally a fish stirred the water; the weeds and reedy grass were filled with the indomitable creepings of life.

"What did your Dad say?"

She put her soft, strong arms about him and he could feel her smile against his cheek. "The same thing yours did."

### VI

On the porch, Sid Leddering rocked and puffed, rocked and puffed. His heart was overfilled with that serene joy that almost brings tears to men's eyes. An awful odor came from the cob pipe under his nose and he enjoyed it very much.

The night was so clear that the Milky Way swept over his head like a sparkling vapor. Nowhere, he knew, was night so beautiful as here in his Iowa. He looked proudly out at the considerable piece of Iowa that he owned and that his grandchild would own.

By and by he rose, still moved by his deep happiness, and tapped out his pipe on the porch column. He looked up at the stars more scientifically.

"No rain tomorrow," he determined to himself. "Gosh, it's a turrible drought."

He considered for a moment and nodded his head. "Bad as 1901, when Cass was born."

# The End of the Party\*

CHRISTOPHER GEROULD

*Christopher Gerould is the young son of Gordon Hall Gerould, professor of English in Princeton University and writer in various fields, and of Katharine Fullerton Gerould, well-known essayist, and his talents, therefore, are not surprising. The End of the Party, which dramatizes the emotions of youth at a sudden crisis, was included in the O. Henry Memorial Volume for 1932.*

THE white concrete road sang under the tires of the roadster, sweeping into the range of the headlights, rushing smoothly towards the car, and disappearing beneath it. Beside the road trees and fences swam past, half lighted, more slowly than the road. Behind them was darkness. Overhead a few stars and a pale, white crescent moon shone without giving light.

A girl was driving the car, and a boy in evening clothes sat close beside her with his arm round the white-fur wrap on her shoulders. Another couple, heads close together, formed a dark triangle in the rumble seat.

The boy and girl in the front seat were singing off-key and loudly to keep the whipping wind from dashing the words of the song away from the singers themselves.

*"Auprès de ma blonde,  
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,  
Auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir."*

\* From *Harper's Magazine*, February, 1932. Reprinted by permission of Christopher Gerould and *Harper's Magazine*.



## THE END OF THE PARTY

The boy broke off the song. "That's a lousy song to sing when you're going fast. It's a marching song. Let's try another."

"All right, professor, what'll it be? We know 'em all."

"Don't know . . . Gawd, how fast are we going?"

The girl looked at the yellow glow of the speedometer on the dash. "Sixty-five. Not fast enough to get away from our friends up there." She nodded over her shoulder at the moon and stars which were cleaving evenly through the dark skies to keep their same relative positions to the car. "How're you feeling, Jed?"

"Swell. How about you?"

"I *feel* swell, but I'd hate to have to interview the family just now."

"Want to let me drive and catch some rest?"

"Never mind. I'd rather do it myself. I prefer to take my own chances on a binge."

"You may be right," Jed said. "My sense of distance goes all flooey when I'm at all tight. I can drive but I hate to. Want a cigarette?"

"Thanks." Jed took out two cigarettes and a lighter. The girl took hers and bent her head to reach the flame cupped in his hands. There was a shock and a wrenching scream. The girl jammed on the brakes, and the car skidded to a stop, facing across the road.

"What was it?" she asked. "I wasn't looking at the road." Her voice was low and frightened.

The pair in the rumble seat sat up, moving apart, and said together, "What's wrong, May?" Jed opened the door of the car and slid out on to the road. He leaned against the side of the car with both hands. "Tom and I'll go back and look, May. You and Eve stay in the car."

Tom threw a rug aside and scrambled out of the rumble seat. He and Jed set off down the road.

Eve mechanically patted her hair and asked again, "What was it, May?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

May was holding on tight to the steering wheel. "I didn't see. I was lighting a cigarette. It—it must have been a dog."

"It didn't sound like a dog. It sounded like . . . Oh, God!" She began to climb out of the rumble seat, looking down the dark road where the boys had gone. She stumbled and fell on her knees. As she was getting up, May opened the door and joined her. Together they started toward the boys, whose voices and footsteps they could hear ahead of them.

Walking down the road, Tom said to Jed, "Did you see what we hit?" Jed did not answer for a moment, and when he did his voice was carefully under control.

"It was a man. I saw him out of the corner of my eye while I was holding the lighter."

"Oh, Jesus! Do you think . . . ?"

"We were going sixty-five when we hit him."

They walked on in silence, looking into the shadowed ditches beside the road. Then they saw what they were looking for. A shapeless black heap of rags lay on the concrete. Jed ran to it and, kneeling, snapped on his lighter. One side of the man's face was like raw beef, and trickles of blood ran from his mouth and nose.

Tom, bending over, put his hand inside the coat and shirt and drew it away suddenly, covered with blood. He stood up and groaned and began to walk around in a little circle on the road. Jed sat balanced on his heels for a moment, then capped his lighter and stood up. "Did you feel his heart?" he asked.

"He didn't have any chest . . . it was all soft and wet." He continued in his circle, and Jed began to swear softly under his breath, choking back ever-quickenings sobs. Tom stopped walking and beat his fist against his palm again and again. "We'll have to . . ."

May's voice called from up the road, "Where are you, Jed?"

Jed did not answer. He was crying softly to himself. Tom called, "Stay where you are. We'll be with you in a minute." He looked at Jed for a moment and then walked over and slapped him in the face. "Shut up," he said, "you'll have me

## THE END OF THE PARTY

doing it too in a minute." Jed stopped crying and wiped his face with his sleeve. Tom took his arm, and they started up the road.

As the boys approached, Eve and May were standing huddled together twenty yards from the car. May, peering into the dark, ran to them as they came near. "Jed, what is it? What happened?" Eve came forward more slowly, and Tom put his arm around her shoulders. Jed looked at the road and said nothing.

Suddenly Tom snatched his arm away from Eve, took a handkerchief from his pocket and began to wipe his hand. He looked at Jed, who was still silent, staring at the road with his hands clasped behind him.

Tom said, "You might as well have it. We've killed a man." "A man?" May's voice went up into the falsetto and broke. She fell down on the road. Eve grabbed Tom by the shoulders. "That's not true, Tom, is it? You're trying to scare us. It was a dog, wasn't it? A dog that ran out in front of the car? It must have been a dog." Jed was carrying May back to the roadster, staggering a little with the weight.

Tom said, "It was a man . . . he had no chest." He began to laugh quietly.

"It couldn't have been. You must be wrong. Let's go back and look again." She started down the road. Tom caught hold of her and held her tight. She began to cry. "Let go of my arm, Tom, you're hurting me." Tom bit his lips to stop laughing and pulled her back towards the car. He opened his mouth, choked, and said, "We'd better look after May. She's in a bad way." Eve stopped struggling and turned towards the car. Glancing at his hand, Tom put his arm around her shoulders.

The roadster completely blocked the road, the headlights shining into the ditch and picking out a dirty newspaper and a broken green bottle. As they approached, they heard May say ". . . no one on the road when I looked away."

Jed said heavily, "We were all drunk." Eve made a protesting noise but didn't say anything. May and Jed were sitting in the front seat. Tom pushed Eve down on the running board and

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

stood alone in the road. "What's the nearest town, May?" he asked.

"Hilton's about four miles away."

"We'll have to go there and 'phone the police. We'd . . . we'd better take that"—he jerked his head—"along with us."

Eve began to laugh shrilly. "Five-passenger car. Where'll we put him? Let him sit on Jed's lap." She laughed with her head thrown back until she slumped off the running board to the ground. She lay there screaming and crying while Tom stooped over her.

In the roadster, May said, "We can't go to the police, Tom."

"We've got to."

"But mother . . . Jed, we can't stay. I'd get arrested. Mother'd die if I was arrested. We've got to get away."

"It was an accident. They can't arrest you, May."

"But I was drunk. We all were, Jed. You said so yourself. They arrest you for that. I'm scared." She raised her voice. "Tom, put Eve in the car. We've got to get away."

Tom stood up, his pudgy face white, and started to say something but stopped. He looked for a moment at May and then bent again over Eve. His voice came softly as though from a distance. "You can't run away from an accident, May."

May beat her fist on the steering wheel. "We've got to get away from here. We'll be arrested and in the papers and everything." Her voice was shrill.

"They might find out who it was, if we ran away," Jed said, "and then it would be worse. We'd better go for the police. I'll say I was driving."

"But it's my car, Jed, and everyone saw me driving when we left." On the ground beside the car, Eve had stopped screaming and was crying softly. Tom lifted one of her arms over his shoulder and turned. "Help me get her in the rumble seat, Jed." Jed climbed out and lifted her by her other arm, and the two boys carried her round to the back of the car. Eve stopped crying and said, "I want to go home." She pushed the boys away and stood up, leaning swayingly against the rear fender.

## THE END OF THE PARTY

Jed looked at her. "We can't run away, May. Eve's all covered with blood."

May put her head in her arms on the steering wheel, and the other three were silent, waiting for her to speak. At last she looked up with a white smile and said, "I'll be good." She opened the door of the car. "You and Tom go and get—him. Eve and I'll get in the rumble seat."

Far down the road they heard the beat of a motor. Eve, who had climbed into the rumble seat, looked at the glow of the approaching lights with a vacant face. "Maybe they've got a five-passenger car," she said, and began to giggle.

## He Will Never Know\*

RICHARD SHERMAN

*Richard Sherman comes from the Middle West, was graduated from Harvard, and now lives in New York City. He has been on the editorial staff of The Forum, and is now on the editorial staff of Vanity Fair.*

WHEN William Rennel's wife left him a year ago, he announced with characteristic generosity that he was entirely to blame and that Janet had been, was now, a saint on earth. "I don't know why she went," he said, "but she must have had a reason. The only thing that puzzles me is what that reason was."

Other people were puzzled too. At thirty-five, with three excellent novels and many short stories to his credit, Willy was not only a success but also an unusually pleasant person, agreeable and human. He and Janet had been married six years, apparently happily, when she took their three-months-old son and went to California. Without a word of explanation.

And now I know why, although during that first hour when I met her last month for a casual lunch in a San Francisco restaurant we talked about everything in the world except Willy. Finally she remarked that she wasn't working.

"Want a job?" I asked. She had been a copy writer.

"No, thanks," she said. "Not yet at least. I'm resting now, just living."

So that was it. That Willy should continue to support her didn't strike me as exactly fair, and my silence showed how I felt.

\*From *Collier's*, October 7, 1933. Reprinted here by permission of Richard Sherman.

## HE WILL NEVER KNOW

"Don't you think he should send me money?" she asked.

"Well. . . ." I was definitely hesitant. "Of course you do have the baby."

"It isn't the baby," she said. "I take Willy's checks because I've earned them."

And that's the way it started, the story of her life with Willy Rennel.

"I fell in love with Willy on first sight," she began. "And in a way I'm still in love with him. He was a perfect husband except for one thing. And that's the thing that got me in the end."

"We met seven years ago just after 'Sea Without Waves' had been published and before he'd written either 'Trouper' or 'Life.' 'Sea Without Waves' had been an outstanding first novel, but like most firsts it was autobiographical. It was just Willy's life—the record of an average boyhood, but told as only he could tell it. He *can* write, don't you think?"

She hurried on, not waiting for my answer.

"And now he was at the difficult stage, because he hadn't an idea in his head for a second book. 'Make up things,' I'd tell him. 'I can't make them up,' he'd complain, 'and even when I do they don't sound real.' It worried him, and he drifted along until he began to think he was just a one-book man. I knew he wasn't, though, and after we were married I was even surer, because he began to work on a novel and kept at it instead of throwing away the first couple of chapters. When the manuscript was about three quarters finished he let me see it."

She poured herself more coffee.

"Was that 'Trouper'?" I asked.

"Yes. And it was also the story of my father's life. He'd been a song-and-dance man, and Willy had woven the yarns I'd told about him into a book."

"After that the magazines began wanting his short stories. He sold two or three, but they weren't very convincing and he knew it. They weren't like 'Trouper.' Then, mostly as a joke, I suggested that there might be a story in our honeymoon. We'd gone on a motor trip through the South, and had got stranded for

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

two stormy days with a Negro farmer's family. I thought maybe he could do something with it."

She paused and looked out of the window at the passing traffic.

"He did something with it, all right. Do you remember the story? It was called 'Overnight.'"

I gasped a little. "Overnight" had won a short-story prize for its year. But there were no Negro farmers in it. The only two characters were a man and a woman, and the story was a frank, sensitive portrayal of their wedding night.

"Yes," she said. "That was our wedding night. I never saw the story until it was in proof, and then it made me sick, physically sick. Willy couldn't understand why. . . .

"After a while I forgave him, though he didn't see that he had done anything for which to be forgiven. But I felt—well, not quite safe. And with reason, too, for he began to sell story after story—and almost all of them were about me. From then on I was a monkey in a cage. People said he was a master at drawing feminine character. He should have been: he photographed it from life. After a time I began to think I was getting morbid or egocentric. All those women can't be me, I'd say to myself; if they were, the effect would be monotonous. But Willy was enough of an artist not to make all his pictures the same. But their base was the same—things I'd said or done or told him I had felt.

"Then, after he had run through my normal reactions, he began to experiment. One night at a party he got me drunk. I felt myself getting tight and said I didn't want any more. 'Go ahead,' he said. 'We'll both get soused.' Well, I got that way—but he remained perfectly sober. The next morning he followed the course of my hang-over like a hawk."

She didn't have to tell me the outcome of that episode. It was there for all the world to read, though framed in a different setting and with a plot, in "The Binge."

"He wanted me to have a love affair, too," she continued. "You don't believe that, do you? But it's true. He didn't come right out and say, 'Janet, why don't you and Wayne Ferguson have a



## HE WILL NEVER KNOW

little fling together,' so I can see how a woman acts when she's deceiving her husband?' but he did almost everything else. It worked with Wayne. I was dangled on a string before his eyes until his reflexes told him he ought to jump. But I wouldn't jump with him. For two weeks afterward, Willy would hardly speak to me, because he felt that somehow I had cheated him."

Janet smiled for the first time; then the smile faded.

"When we were married I wanted a baby. Willy didn't. Well, after I realized that I was being made to serve as human copy, I began to talk about the baby again. It seemed to me that having one might save us. If I gave Willy a child, perhaps he wouldn't demand material for fiction.

"At first he was still against the idea, but finally, all of a sudden, he changed his mind. He said that he had been a fool.

"You know what's coming. 'Life.' That book is me—me and the baby and Willy.

"Before the baby came, I was never out of Willy's sight.

"My nurse said she had never seen such a tender husband. She thought he was wonderful and that I was a very lucky woman. 'You know, Mrs. Rennel,' she said, 'we just couldn't keep him out. And I was glad that we didn't, because he really wasn't a bit of bother. He just sat in a corner watching; and every now and then he'd try to divert himself by scribbling on a pad of paper he had with him.'

"By what?" I asked. I couldn't believe it.

"By scribbling on a pad of paper. Being a writer, I supposed it eased his mind."

She ceased talking and I began to remember "Life." It was easily the best of Willy Rennel's novels, and also the most successful commercially. No one had understood how a man could have written it.

"So that's why you left him?" I said.

Janet began gathering up her gloves and bag.

"No," she replied. "I would have stayed with him even after that, because I loved him, if it hadn't been for something else."

"Do you mind if I ask what that was?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

She smiled. "No. It was something in my mind—a fear. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps not. But it was a chance I couldn't afford to take."

She was standing now. The restaurant was empty save for the two of us and a waiter who shifted expectantly in the background.

"You see," she said, "Willy had seen me in almost every human emotion except one. He hadn't seen me die."

## Hound of Cyclops\*

P. M. STERLING

*P. M. Sterling, one of the Frontier and Midland group of writers, lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.*

FAR off in the darkness the train mourned like a lonely dog. Its way lay past the streets of a city but night and distance made a tunnel for its lament.

A little boy slept on a low bed in a dark room. At the train's first sound he stirred in his sleep and when the long white searching light played over the grade, miles away, he lifted himself, put aside his covers and walked as one entranced to the window. For an instant the light was turned straight upon him. It made a path upon which to walk.

The window was open. He pressed his forehead against the screen.

The light rushed rigidly ahead, cleaving a wide white arc from the black. Immutable—hypnotic—mad eye of a train.

The distant panting swelled and filled all the sound circles of the night.

The little boy swayed, an infant priest in pajama vestments, into the pathway of the light. The screen wire made tiny checks on his forehead and on his hot palms. The room was very still. There were only his own fast breathing and the sighs of his sleeping father and mother behind him.

The train panted toward him. It seemed to head straight for his window and when almost it came there it turned its great jointed body and fled past him, howling.

He watched it cut through the dark town, its great unblink-

\*From *Frontier and Midland*, Winter, 1934-5. Reprinted here by permission of P. M. Sterling and *Frontier and Midland*.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

ing eye lighting the swath before it, its light-patched body twisting through the darkness after it.

A strange light. Never staying, like a street lamp, blending slowly into shadows. Never soft and rosy like the Neon signs that sometimes caught the train's smoke and coloured it like western cloud. Never cheerful, like a light in a house, circling a bed and a rug and a toy train in the corner. A strange light. Springing suddenly over the hill, rushing straight toward his window, never blinking, never turning away.

Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog barked. The train bell began to ring. The white unblinking light was gone. The moon gleamed as softly from a cloud as a candle behind a cupped hand.

The little boy pulled away from the screen and rubbed his eyes. His white bed with its tousled covers humped faintly in the shadows along the wall and seemed a long way off.

If the children in the neighborhood followed the railroad tracks they shortened the distance to school. There was no danger because they knew the hours of the trains. One came at the recess, one in the afternoon and all the others at night. It was only the little boy who knew how many at night, when they came in the blackness and wakened only him.

He walked slowly the rails toward the spot where he had left crossed pins to be crushed into scissors. His books and his lunch sack bulged the front of his sweater and with his hands in his pockets he balanced easily along length after length of rail.

He could see how the track faced his house and how it ran for so long a way straight toward his window. Two shining rails lay close together far beyond the schoolhouse and spread wider and wider toward him.

He found his pin scissors and fastened them to his sweater, then scuffed along the cinders up the middle of the track.

If a train should come! He glanced up quickly.

"I'd throw things at it."

## HOUND OF CYCLOPS

He reached for a handful of cinders and skipped them up the roadbed.

"I'd grab 'hold of the cow-catcher and ride."

A great ringing commenced in his ears and remembered noises rolled down the tracks. He stopped and began to tremble. There were no trains but loud came the rushing, tumbling, roaring in his ears.

He covered his eyes with his arms and stumbled over the rails and down the incline to a path other children had made.

Sobs pushed out of his throat and he brushed rudely past two prim little girls.

"Sissy Brown!" they called. "The bugger man is after him."

His home-room seat faced the window. The window held itself up to frame the quite far away track. Almost as at his home, the train ran straight onward for an instant before it curved slowly and went further and indistinctly away. There was only one moment, one fragment of a moment, when the great intent head wedged the tracks apart and came *straight*.

"Paul, you are bordering Nebraska; not studying its atmosphere."

Don't teacher. Don't pull the blind. It's coming. Hear it come! Just a minute. Don't pull the blind. Please don't. Now. Now! There it is! Oh-h!

He sat down quickly. Joy rushed through him, keeping time to the pulsing echoes outside.

I saw it anyway, I saw it *then*.

When it came, it suddenly made everything else retreat. The teacher with her pointed stick was abruptly a rock statue that rushed backward as fast as the train rushed onward. If she were saying anything—

Only once before had the train come when he was reciting. The teacher had thought that he was sick, but she had not pulled the blind. It was only that one instant that made the difference. That one instant when he could not move—when the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

train came straight and true—and everything else rushed backward.

When those in front of him recited or the teacher came and stood before the window he felt himself almost pushing them over to get them out of the way. Perhaps he didn't push them away, but they never kept him from watching.

At the morning recess the train came from the other direction and ran parallel to the school yards in a cut a block away. The rushing and puffing was then never able to drown out the screams and laughter of his playmates. Sometimes he even forgot its coming and saw only the disappearing red light far up the tracks toward his home.

The father and mother were sleeping again and tonight there was only enough moonlight to show the pillows and a pale arm across the dark blanket.

The little boy went noiselessly past at the foot of their bed and thought what a mound his father made to push up his mother's arm almost straight. He could see very clearly because he had been awake for a long time in the dark room.

The train had not yet come. He had waited for it for a long time and he had not heard its far-away howl. There were no more lights in the town outside his window. The way of the track was blackness and there was very little moon.

Now it will come. I'll wait in the window. I'll hear it pretty soon.

He climbed into the window and braced his knees against one side and his back against the other. The top of the night was black and there were no stars. There was only the silver blur in the black sky. There were no sounds on the ground or up in the air. There were no sounds anywhere except in his own body. They were gentle too, because he was waiting. Like the stillness, he was waiting.

For a long time he sat and heard nothing except his own breath floating gently in and out of him. It made a rhythm, a music for deafness. It made a pattern, like the lifting and falling

## HOUND OF CYCLOPS

of a dog's side when he sleeps. It made a feeling, a drifting, a far-away boat feeling.

Suddenly the father snored and the quick sound hurt the boy. He turned to the bed and remembered that it was near. He watched it until the pain floated away and his mother's arm came out of the darkness again and curved across his father. Her arm made a track over the dark blanket, a blurred silver track. He breathed again into the night and felt the drifting and was soon asleep.

And while he slept, cramped in the little space in the window, he dreamed.

He was walking to school between the two cold shining tracks. He jostled his books in his sweater and bent to pick up the little scissors and the other pins which had been crushed to sword blades. He stepped nicely from tie to tie and sometimes jumped past one to get over the ground quickly. Then he was in the middle of the track, shuffling through the cinders, crushing his shoes down on the brittle path and walking and walking and walking between two rails that narrowed and framed a long long path that never ended.

The crunching on the brittle path swelled up and rumbled on the rails and made an echo that started far away and rolled down the tracks again and swelled as it rolled and rumbled.

The night that was so still, the day that had shown the tracks, the sturdy ties that were flat and so sure, were all away now and he was not walking. He was standing still between the tracks. His feet were heavy, as heavy as the ties that held up the tracks.

He wanted to walk, to pull his feet up and walk, but there was no way to stir his feet. They were as solid as the ties. And the train was coming. It was coming fast.

The light was suddenly big, and out of the darkness, near. It was so white, mad white. It rushed at him and was a long time in rushing. He looked straight into the awful center of it and heard the roaring in the throat behind it.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

It came faster. Faster and faster. Big before him and awful in its whiteness.

He began to scream and for a long time they could not stop him. The train rushed by and added its shrieks to his.

"Stop it! Stop your screaming, I say."

His father shook him but he could not stop. His mother was there suddenly, hugging his head to her warm body.

"Paul, you *must* stop. Mother's here. Daddy's here. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"It's those trains, Helen. He gets up and watches them every night. Son, I forbid you to do it any more."

"That's right, Paul. You must never get up in the night again."

He did not hear them then, but later, when his mother sat beside his bed and stroked his forehead, he began to understand and his whimpering ceased.

They thought he slept and they dimmed the light and whispered about him in their own bed for a long time.

"He's never to get up again—"

"I had no idea—"

"—my fault—"

The little boy lay as they had left him, but his eyes were open in the darkness.

"You may not watch the trains any more. You may not get up in the night again."

The words were like the rushing light and they terrified him with the same intensity. Yet now he could not scream. He could only lie and feel them beat in a pattern out of his heart.

In the morning his mother gave him an extra cake for his lunch and told him gently to go the sidewalk way to school and to cross over the viaduct instead of following the tracks. He nodded and ran quickly until he was out of her sight. Then he turned and looked at the tracks.

They stretched far away, as lonely in the midst of a city as he among all the people of the world. A great longing came to go down and touch the rails. He did it in vision, stooping quietly.

Then the rushing came and the thought of the white light



## HOUND OF CYCLOPS

upon him. He trembled and hid his eyes in his arms and ran and ran.

At night they put him to bed with a slight fever and smiled when they tip-toed away.

"He'll get over it, Helen. A good night's sleep—"

They were right. He wanted to sleep. Yet when he closed his eyes a train came rushing. And when he kept them open and stared at the ceiling, he could see a long lonely track shining.

Tomorrow, or soon, she won't say, go the sidewalk way. Then I'll go down. I'll go down and *feel* the tracks.

With the promise came drowsiness, and, later, sleep.

Far off in the darkness the train mourned, like a lonely dog.

The mother stirred under her dark blanket. The little boy lifted himself, put aside his covers and stood, waiting. The long light played over the grade, miles away. He raised his face toward it and felt the quick beauty which they had forbidden him.

It made a path upon which to walk.

He went quickly past at the foot of the larger bed and saw his mother's soft arm, pale and beautiful.

It took only a moment to be out of the house and across the street into the little park beside the tracks.

The train was still a long way off, but it was coming fast. Its moans began to rumble and roar down the tracks. The boy panted up the embankment and past the singing rails. The sharp cinders hurt his feet. The night winds made him shiver, but more than this, he was shivering with a joy within him.

They could not keep him from his train!

It was coming! The light was all about him! He had not known it was so white. It rushed at him and was a long time in rushing. He tried to pull his feet and walk—run—but he could not move.

The mad eye never wavered. It drew his eyes straight to its own awful center and he could not look away. He began to scream as he had done in his dream. He screamed and screamed, then suddenly he had no power even for that.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

It came so fast—so slowly. It also screamed. It screamed to him, though it wanted no answer.

Then out of the darkness a round warm arm—a sliding down the cinders—his mother's trembling body and the loping by of an iron creature.

"See," his mother babbled shrilly. "It's a nice train. Such a—nice train."

She stroked his forehead. Her hands were cold and unsteady and the already damp chill about his hair began to spread over his face and make him colder. She held him back against her stomach, and higher up he could hear her heart beating fast and tremendously.

The great wheels rushed by above him and he could not look away from them.

Sometimes his mother stroked his forehead. Sometimes she stroked his nose. Sometimes she patted his face without caring where his eyes or nose or chin were.

Suddenly he began to know the protection of her body, the sweet smell of her arm, the pounding of her heart in the clattering echoes of the train.

He looked after the disappearing red lights, and gave up his fears into her so soothing warmth.

## Guidance\*

MARGARET WIDDEMER

*Margaret Widdemer, poet, novelist, and short story writer, was born in Pennsylvania. She has received honorary degrees for her literary work, an M.A. from Middlebury and Litt.D. from Bucknell. Her romances are widely popular, and her volume of poems, The Old Road to Paradise, shared with Carl Sandburg's book the Pulitzer award for the best volume of poems of its year.*

THE blue limousine checked before the fashionable church on Park Avenue. There was another car, a gray one with a crest on its door, where the chauffeur would have liked to park the limousine.

"Can't you get it any nearer than that?" demanded Mrs. Meriden sharply up the speaking-tube. "Push the other car down."

"What's she doin' here?" murmured her footman to the chauffeur as he lifted a red ear from the hole.

"Askin' for guidance, no doubt," said the chauffeur, with a grin that pointed it out as a good joke.

"Is it guidance?" The handsome young Irish footman snorted softly. "If the young madam got to heaven itself, she'd be telling St. Peter how to handle his job before she'd her halo on straight!" He sprang to open the door, a deferential automaton.

Mrs. Meriden turned a hard, handsome young face to her husband.

"I have to inspect the church furnishing on behalf of the com-

\* From *Collier's*, February 10, 1934. Reprinted here by permission of Margaret Widdemer.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

mittee," she said. "Fifteen minutes should do it, Allan. We'll get to the Carletons' at exactly the right time."

His tired, gray eyes faced her brilliant black ones with a courteous denial.

"Sorry, Olive. I can just make my own appointment by taking a taxi from here."

"You can't," she said imperiously. "This reception's important."

He smiled a little. "This is more important to me than the reception."

He stepped past her. She heard him speak to a cabby that his upraised cane had summoned.

"Plaza. Fifth Avenue entrance," he said.

She frowned, clicking up the dark aisle. She was too easy with Allan, that was the trouble. She'd have it out with him tonight; once and for all this time. When she had married him six years back he'd been so eager to please, to adjust, to make her happy! And now behaving like this, when everyone knew how much she had forwarded them socially—how good her judgment was.

Her annoyance sharpened to anger when, ending the inspection at her own pew, she found it occupied by a stranger. A slim little girl in a white-collared blue suit, her bereted yellow head bowed on the pew before her, her hands gripping it on either side like a child praying about Santa Claus. Olive touched her on the shoulder, speaking harshly. She had never approved of this high church idea, leaving churches open all day for prayers. It wasn't fair to pew-owners.

"This is my pew. I wish to inspect the cushions. May I ask you to move?"

The girl lifted a soft, blue-eyed face still flushed and intent with prayer. She smiled like a friendly baby.

"Sorry—but—I had to come in and pray for guidance," she said.

"That's nonsense," Olive laid down the law. "What's your problem?" There was a gentleness about the girl that invited dictation. But she rose and moved into the aisle.

"I'd rather not tell you," she said. Then she turned back. "Yes,

## GUIDANCE

I will! Perhaps you were sent. It's a position I'm offered. An important one. I want it badly. But I have to decide whether it's fair to take it over another girl's head."

Just one of a hundred well-groomed little secretaries, then. Olive had nearly mistaken her for one of her own class. . . . She went on, nevertheless. She felt it was rather fine of her to take time to advise a girl like this.

"Is the other woman giving good service?"

"No. But she thinks so."

"She must be stupid. Are you competent?"

"Yes—oh, yes; I've practically been training for it always!"

"You are weakly sentimental to consider her, then. She'd be sent away anyway. The incompetent must go to the wall."

The girl was not paying attention. Olive felt a sharp contempt for her. . . . Competent! Not likely! She was staring with silly intensity at the pew she had left, at the inconspicuous nameplate.

"Are *you* Mrs. Meriden?" she asked softly.

Olive supposed it was awe in her voice. Perhaps she was trying to make a social contact on the strength of a passing benevolence. Olive called her to account. "Certainly. I told you this was my pew. You asked for advice, listen to it. There is no question of unfairness with incompetents. Take the position before it is given to someone else."

She stood aside, silently dismissing the yellow-haired girl. As she waited, handsome and erect in her furs, she felt regal, complete. . . . Her car waiting without; her ambitions so nearly gained; her handsome, prosperous young husband so nearly broken to her hand, awaiting her shortly at home. . . .

The girl lifted her face, a little strained and pale between the loose golden rings.

"I will do as you advise," she said. She went slowly down the aisle. Mrs. Meriden followed.

From the door of the church she saw the yellow-haired girl speak to the driver of the gray car with the crested panel.

"The Plaza. Fifth Avenue entrance," said the yellow-haired girl in the white-collared blue suit.

## Black Water\*

ALICE BUCHANAN

*Alice Buchanan, the daughter of a British missionary, was born in Japan and spent her childhood in that country. She came to America for her college training, was graduated from a southern college and did graduate work at Columbia University, after which she returned to Japan to teach in the Joshi Daigaku (Woman's College) of Tokyo. Recently she came back to America, married a young mining engineer, and commenced to write. Her work has the qualities of suggestion and restraint that make Japanese writing effective in its economy. The reader has to read slowly here to get the story in its implications. Otherwise he might not realize that behind the words is an account of a murder, a secret burial in the forest, a tracking down of the crime by the victim's witch mother, a Croatan Indian, and her witch dog, and a revenge on the murderer.*

THE solitary shack across the cotton field looked even more deserted than usual. The swamp, of course, was always behind it and the stoop had been broken for months, but today the door was fast closed, and no smoke oozed out of the chinks in the chimney. A single hen picked disconsolately at the withered flowerbed.

"Looks like Millie isn't there. 'S funny." Dody shifted the bundle under her arm as she spoke, and turned to look at Lit. A queer kid. They had been in the same class three years now and still she didn't understand her.

\* From *New Copy*, 1932, Columbia University. Reprinted by permission of Alice Buchanan and *New Copy*.

## BLACK WATER

"How come? Doesn't she go to town on Saturdays with the rest of them?"

"No, Millie's a Croatan. You know how much the Croatans and the darkies hate each other. Since she married Henry neither will have anything to do with her." What on earth would Lit want to talk about this afternoon? She was different, all right. Just like her to suggest a tramp in the swamp. Still, you couldn't go to town, anyway, because it was nigger day, and hockey practice was called off. Make-up gym was such a frightful bore you had to do something afterwards. Might as well.

"Oh, yes, I remember Uncle Buxton telling me about that one afternoon last month when he was looking for snakes in the South Campus. He's scared to death of her mother. Most of them are. His eyes simply rolled when he said, 'I tells you, Miss Lit, dey ain't no snakes yallerer dan dat yaller Injun conjur woman'—he'd just killed a moccasin and hung it in the fork of a tree—I sho don' wants to be Henry.'"

"How silly." Lit was a little conceited about the way she could talk darky. She waved her hands too much. "I might as well leave these dresses there. Nobody ever comes on the swamp road, and you can't see the door from that side anyway." They started across the uneven downward slope of the field. "I don't see how they manage to believe all that rot."

"Oh, I don't know. Of course she's probably just a stupid old woman. But witches hundreds of years ago—with hazel wands and singing' . . . He said something about a dog, too—'It ain't got no human sense, Miss Lit.' And when I laughed at him and told him of course not, or it wouldn't be a dog, he just rolled his eyes some more and mumbled under his breath 'black witch-dawg.'"

"Well, I guess she needs something if she's living alone." The shriveled cotton pods rasped against their ribbed stockings. Lucky they were in gym clothes. Be still luckier by the end of the afternoon. Black swamp mud was the worst thing in the world to get off.

A rusty iron padlock secured the door. Clearly, the hen, who

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

sidled off suspiciously as Dody put her bundle on the unbroken part of the stoop, was in sole possession. The two girls turned and looked behind them. The cotton-field was still with the scraggy desolation of late October. Beyond, the powerhouse tank squatted incongruously over the tops of the trees which otherwise obscured the unlovely buildings of the back campus. A little to the left was their dormitory, Minturn Hall, but it too seemed to share in the detached silence.

Lit shivered. "Come on. Let's be starting." She led the way around and scrambled up a footpath in the short embankment.

The road was high here, but it soon dropped down as it entered the swamp. The bleak detachment was gone. A swamp road somehow had to be personal with its wayward curves and sudden narrowings. The honeysuckle vines at the sides were half bare, revealing the tangled interweaving which laced the road to the yellow-grey blanket of leaves. In the distance through the network of tall, slim trunks and baring bushes a late maple flared.

Around the curve the road became dusty, half-rotten boards bridging a little creek.

"Let's stop here a minute." Lit curled up on the bank, her knees under her chin.

Dody sat on one plank longer than the others and dangled her legs over the stream. The water was black, clear black with a warmth in it somewhere—or maybe it was just the star-shaped, sweetgum leaf floating down. It was good to be away from bells and rules and stupid people. People like Joe Graham. (Why on earth was she having a date with him tonight?) They were flabby, physically and mentally. Perhaps she was beginning to understand Lit. She turned to look at her. Lit's eyes were green and narrow in a white face and her mouth like the rest of her was too thin. Dody hadn't realized she was talking. In the middle of a sentence—

"... Tried to write something but it didn't work. Sounded like a weak imitation of a Pre-Raphaelite Lycidas—



## BLACK WATER

Bring heaps of tattered marigolds, and cool  
Long-stemmed lilies from the wavering fringe  
Of the black water. . . .

Only there are no lilies," she broke off. The breeze made a feathery drift of yellowing cypress needles. "Look at that reflection."

Dody leaned over. It was like black onyx, or a photograph negative that had been tinted. Her own eyes and the sky looked back bluer and deeper for the blackness.

"Medora," (Lit was about the only person who called her that. She rather liked it this afternoon) "I think if I slid into the water I'd go down and down until I reached the tops of the trees."

Dody laughed. "Better not try it; nice soft mud and cypress pots."

"Oh, yes, it's actually quite uninteresting on the bottom. I'd rather not think about that."

"I know. This is better."

There was a slow creak of wheels around the bend in front. Dody swung her feet to the bridge and stood up. "But I'm not planning to be jolted into the experiment now by that buggy. Wonder who's coming down here? There's nothing on the other side of the swamp but the Croatan settlement, and you'd think they'd all be in town by this time."

A grey mule stalked leisurely by. Sitting bolt upright in the open buggy behind him was an old woman. Her leathery prune-wrinkled face was dull brown against the faded black of her dress. In contrast, her intent, fixed eyes were glowing. She did not look at the girls as she passed them.

"That's Millie's mother," Dody whispered as the buggy disappeared. "Doesn't she look like a devil?"

"The witch? Wonder if she does the usual things, riding broomsticks and haunting graveyards."

"Maybe she just came from one. I saw some broken glass had rolled into the corner of the buggy." Dody chuckled. "Ever play cow poker on a long drive? Each cow on your side of the road

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

counts one point, and a grey mule is ten. Ordinary graveyards are five points off, but Croatan ones—you can always tell them by the broken glass—are ten off. Our old lady gives us an even break."

As even around the curve the solitude of the road seemed to have been broken, she was glad when Lit suggested turning off on a little path to the right. They walked single file on a thick mattress of leaves, occasionally bending low to avoid overhanging branches.

Something moved suddenly in a clump of bushes ahead on the left. They stopped. Dody could feel the blood thumping in her ears. Silly to be scared. It was on the path now. Through the half-leafless tangle of vines and underbrush she could see it was a man—tall, with powerful shoulders—a negro. He stooped to avoid a hanging briar. As he straightened, she saw his face.

"Oh!" She was ashamed of the relief in her voice. "H'lo, Henry."

There was a broken place in the path. He stepped carefully upon a protruding cypress knee before he looked up. "Howdy!"

"Going home? I left some white dresses for Millie to wash. Wish you'd take 'em in."

"Yes'm. Goin' now." A few steps past them he looked back over his shoulder. "Only—Millie ain't—thar."

"Yes, I know. That's why I left them outside." Henry was certainly a slow-moving darky. Sometimes it seemed that he didn't have all the sense that should have been coming his way.

"Laundry!" Lit's voice was hard and bitter. "Laundry! It's always like that. You have English class at eleven, and you forget about student government, committees, Education parallel. And then there's a bell and you have to go to lunch—sauerkraut and wieners! We come out here just to get away from the whole damn thing, and when we do manage to shake loose a little, we run into it all again. I can't *stand* it."

Lit was right. She got too excited about it, but she was right.

"Look at that." Lit pointed to a spot just beyond the bush clump. "Why don't they throw away their old bottles somewhere

## BLACK WATER

else?" The grey-brown blanket of leaves had been disarranged, and the scattered bits of broken glass showed all the more plainly against the soggy blackness. Two footprints gleamed wetly, a further desecration. "Let's go back."

"Oh, no, Lit." Dody suddenly wanted to go on and on into the swamp, to tell Lit that she did understand, had understood all along—that once you had broken loose you weren't ever entirely chained down to it again. "This might be a path turning off here to the right. Doesn't look like anybody's been there. Let's take it."

The wreathing briars tore at the backs of their middies as they scrambled through. As Dody stopped to free her hair she heard a slight rustling behind. She couldn't see what it was through the brambles at first, it fitted so well into the shadows. He looked bigger than the usual hunting dog, but he was sniffing at the leaves on the path they had just left.

"What's that?" Lit was in front.

"Just somebody's hunting dog. He isn't coming here, anyway."

Soon the briars were gone, but the embryo path seemed also to have dwindled to a succession of logs.

"Oh, let's go on!" Lit's tone was like a child's. "Perhaps we'll see something no one else has ever seen—where no one else has ever been. . . ."

The logs were slippery with greyish-green moss. The leaves on the ground looked darker and wetter. There was scarcely any underbrush now, only occasional holly bushes bristling. Looked like a glint of water ahead. Once when Dody's foot slipped, she was half-way up to the knee in the black ooze. The spaces between the logs were getting wider, so you had to watch your steps more carefully.

"Ah!"

Lit's exclamation made her look up. No longer any pretence of solid ground, not even marsh ooze. The slate-black water stretched out in front and far to the left. No suggestion of warmth here, no colour. Only cypress after cypress, straight, grey trunk shafts, shooting up through lifeless air from bulbous

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

growths above the water. But the lake below was living, peopled with the reflections. A strange world in which everything grew two ways, and the growth down was the more real and more terrible. So this was the end of their search.

As she looked, all the still horror of the place was frozen into a sound, a long, minor wail from away behind them on the other side of the swamp—no human cry, but yet not altogether the howl of a dog. It rose in sharp ululation, and subsided to rise again in hyena-like chucklings. There seemed a note of ghastly triumph as it died away.

To get back, away from this grotesque mirror world! To get back to people and things—dull things like cotton-fields and Millie and washing.

"If we keep along the edge to the right we'll get out quicker. It'll be awfully late." The words were unreal in her ears.

"Medora!" Lit spoke sharply. "I can't go. This—I've got to stay here—a little while."

An increasing anger filled her. She hated Lit. "Well, stay here then. I've got to get back." She balanced herself carefully on a cypress knee. Ahead where the stream first widened into the lake she could probably wade across. On the other side, she realized that Lit was slowly following her.

She spoke only once when they were struggling through underbrush again. "Gosh! I hope we get out of this. You know how Miss Marston simply curls up and spits if we're late to dinner." But it was still her blind fear of the place behind which drove her on.

At last the light line of swamp edge, which had seemed deceptively near for so long, was reached. Once more the familiar, wrinkled cotton-fields, and in front, a little to the right, the power-house tank.

"Why, we're back almost where we started! We'll just make it. Thank goodness, the swamp road is the only one we'll be crossing. I'd hate for anybody to see me like this."

A grey mule hitched to an empty buggy, who waggled one ear speculatively at their passing, was the sole observer. A faint

## BLACK WATER

clink of glass accompanied the creaking of the axles as he resumed his patient search for something worth a nibble.

Twenty minutes later, as Dody dashed around the corner in third floor Minturn to turn on her tub, she was horrified to see Lit standing by the window. "Better hurry up; you'll be hopelessly late!"

Lit's eyes were long and green as she looked away. "You know, Medora, the swamp this afternoon—I want to write a poem about it. Look at it now."

It was lovely. The trees had massed themselves together in the shadow and seemed to come nearer, almost engulfing the little shack, for no light shone from its window. Through the half-dark you could still see something white by the door. Henry must have changed his mind about going home. . . . Joe Graham would probably want to drive over to the show at Lumberton. Perhaps the black transparent velvet with the turquoise earrings would be best . . .

## A Trip to Czardis\*

EDWIN GRANBERRY

*Edwin Granberry is a Mississippian by birth. He attended the University of Florida, took a degree from Columbia, and later became a member of the famous "47 Workshop" group at Harvard under the late Professor Baker.*

*He has taught at Miami University, at Stephens School, and since 1933 has been assistant professor of creative literature at Rollins College. He is the author of various books and short stories, and has done a number of translations. The O. Henry Memorial Committee, in 1931-32, awarded the prize for the best short story in American magazines to his A Trip to Czardis.*

IT WAS still dark in the pine woods when the two brothers awoke. But it was plain that day had come, and in a little while there would be no more stars. Day itself would be in the sky and they would be going along the road. Jim waked first, coming quickly out of sleep and sitting up in the bed to take fresh hold of the things in his head, starting them up again out of the corners of his mind where sleep had tucked them. Then he waked Daniel and they sat up together in the bed. Jim put his arm around his young brother, for the night had been dewy and cool with the swamp wind. Daniel shivered a little and whimpered, it being dark in the room and his baby concerns still on him somewhat, making sleep heavy on his mind and slow to give understanding its way.

"Hit's the day, Dan'l. This day that's right here now, we are goen. You'll recollect it all in a minute."

\*From *The Forum*, April, 1932. Reprinted by permission of Edwin Granberry.

## A TRIP TO CZARDIS

"I recollect. We are goen in the wagon to see papa—"

"Then hush and don't whine."

"I were dreamen, Jim."

"What dreamen did you have?"

"I can't tell. But it were fearful what I dreamt."

"All the way we are goen this time. We won't stop at any places, but we will go all the way to Czardis to see papa. I never see such a place as Czardis."

"I recollect the water tower—"

"Not in your own right, Dan'l. Hit's by my tellen it you see it in your mind."

"And lemonade with ice in it I saw—"

"That too I seen and told to you."

"Then I never seen it at all?"

"Hit's me were there, Dan'l. I let you play like, but hit's me who went to Czardis. Yet I never till this day told half how much I see. There's sights I never told."

They stopped talking, listening for their mother's stir in the kitchen. But the night stillness was unlifted. Daniel began to shiver again.

"Hit's dark," he said.

"Hit's your eyes stuck," Jim said. "Would you want me to drip a little water on your eyes?"

"Oh!" cried the young one, pressing his face into his brother's side, "don't douse me, Jim, no more. The cold aches me."

The other soothed him, holding him around the body.

"You won't have e're chill or malarie ache today, Dan'l. Hit's a fair day—"

"I won't be cold?"

"Hit's a bright day. I hear mounren doves starten a'ready. The sun will bake you warm . . . Uncle Holly might buy us somethen new to eat in Czardis."

"What would it be?"

"Hit ain't decided yet . . . He hasn't spoke. Hit might be somethen sweet. Maybe a candy ball fixed on to a rubber string."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"A candy ball!" Daniel showed a stir of happiness. "Oh, Jim!" But it was a deceit of the imagination, making his eyes shine wistfully; the grain of his flesh was against it. He settled into a stillness by himself.

"My stomach would retch it up, Jim . . . I guess I couldn't eat it."

"You might could keep a little down."

"No . . . I would bring it home and keep it . . ."

Their mother when they went to bed had laid a clean pair of pants and a waist for each on the chair. Jim crept out of bed and put on his clothes, then aided his brother on with his. They could not hear any noise in the kitchen, but hickory firewood burning in the kitchen stove worked a smell through the house, and in the forest guinea fowls were sailing down from the trees and poking their way along the half-dark ground toward the kitchen steps, making it known the door was open and that within someone was stirring about at the getting of food.

Jim led his brother by the hand down the dark way of yellow-pine stairs that went narrowly and without banisters to the rooms below. The young brother went huddling in his clothes, ague-like, knowing warmth was near, hungering for his place by the stove, to sit in peace on the bricks in the floor by the stove's side and watch the eating, it being his nature to have a sickness against food.

They came in silence to the kitchen, Jim leading and holding his brother by the hand. The floor was lately strewn with fresh bright sand and that would sparkle when the daybreak got above the forest, though now it lay dull as hoarfrost and cold to the unshod feet of the brothers. The door to the firebox of the stove was open and in front of it their mother sat in a chair speaking low as they entered, muttering under her breath. The two boys went near and stood still, thinking she was blessing the food, there being mush dipped up and steaming in two bowls. And they stood cast down until she lifted her eyes to them and spoke.

"Your clothes on already," she said. "You look right neat."

She did not rise, but kept her chair, looking cold and stiff, with



## A TRIP TO CZARDIS

the cloth of her black dress sagging between her knees. The sons stood in front of her and she laid her hand on first one head and then the other and spoke a little about the day, charging them to be sober and of few words, as she had raised them.

Jim sat on the bench by the table and began to eat, mixing dark molasses sugar through his bowl of mush. But a nausea began in Daniel's stomach at sight of the sweet and he lagged by the stove, gazing at the food as it passed into his brother's mouth.

Suddenly a shadow filled the back doorway and Holly, their uncle, stood there looking in. He was lean and big and dark from wind and weather, working in the timber as their father had done. He had no wife and children and would roam far off with the timber gangs in the Everglades. This latter year he did not go far, but stayed near them. Their mother stopped and looked at the man and he looked at her in silence. Then he looked at Jim and Daniel.

"You're goen to take them after all?"

She waited a minute, seeming to get the words straight in her mind before bringing them out, making them say what was set there.

"He asked to see them. Nobody but God-Almighty ought to tell a soul hit can or can't have."

Having delivered her mind, she went out into the yard with the man and they spoke more words in an undertone, pausing in their speech.

In the silence of the kitchen, Daniel began to speak out and name what thing among his possessions he would take to Czardis to give his father. But the older boy belittled this and that and everything that was called up, saying one thing was of too little consequence for a man, and that another was of no account because it was food. But when the older boy had abolished the idea and silence had regained, he worked back to the thought, coming to it roundabout and making it new and as his own, letting it be decided that each of them would take their father a pomegranate from the tree in the yard.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

They went to the kitchen door. The swamp fog had risen suddenly. They saw their mother standing in the lot while their uncle hitched the horse to the wagon. Leaving the steps, Jim climbed to the first crotch of the pomegranate tree. The reddest fruits were on the top branches. He worked his way up higher. The fog was now curling up out of the swamp, making gray mountains and rivers in the air and strange ghost shapes. Landmarks disappeared in the billows, or half-seen, they bewildered the sight and an eye could so little mark the known or strange that a befuddlement took hold of the mind, like the visitations sailors beheld in the fogs of Okeechobee. Jim could not find the ground. He seemed to have climbed into the mountains. The light was unnatural and dark and the pines were blue and dark over the mountains.

A voice cried out of the fog:

"Are worms gnawen you that you skin up a pomegranate tree at this hour? Don't I feed you enough?"

The boy worked his way down. At the foot of the tree he met his mother. She squatted and put her arm around him, her voice tight and quivering, and he felt tears on her face.

"We ain't come to the shame yet of you and Dan'l huntin your food off trees and grass. People seein' you gnawen on the road will say Jim Cameron's sons are starved, foragen like cattle of the field."

"I were gotten the pomegranates for papa," said the boy, resigned to his mother's concern. She stood up when he said this, holding him in front of her skirts. In a while she said:

"I guess we won't take any, Jim . . . But I'm proud it come to you to take your papa somethen."

And after a silence, the boy said:

"Hit were Dan'l it come to, Mamma."

Then she took his hand, not looking down, and in her throat, as if in her bosom, she repeated:

"Hit were a fine thought and I'm right proud . . . though to-day we won't take anything . . ."

## A TRIP TO CZARDIS

"I guess there's better pomegranates in Czardis where we are goen—"

"There's no better pomegranates in Czardis then right here over your head," she said grimly. "If pomegranates were needed, we would take him his own . . . You are older'n Dan'l, Jim. When we get to the place we are goen, you won't know your papa after so long. He will be pale and he won't be as bright as you recollect. So don't labor him with questions but speak when it behooves you and let him see you are upright."

When the horse was harnessed and all was ready for the departure, the sons were seated on the shallow bed of hay in the back of the wagon and the mother took the driver's seat alone. The uncle had argued for having the top up over the seat, but she refused the shelter, remarking that she had always driven under the sky and would do it still today. He gave in silently and got upon the seat of his own wagon, which took the road first, their wagon following. This was strange and the sons asked:

"Why don't we all ride in Uncle Holly's wagon?"

But their mother made no reply.

For several miles they traveled in silence through their own part of the woods, meeting no one. The boys whispered a little to themselves, but their mother and their uncle sat without speaking, nor did they turn their heads to look back. At last the narrow road they were following left the woods and came out to the highway and it was seen that other wagons besides their own were going to Czardis. And as they got farther along, they began to meet many other people going to the town, and the boys asked their mother what day it was. It was Wednesday. And then they asked her why so many wagons were going along the road if it wasn't Saturday and a market day. When she told them to be quiet, they settled down to watching the people go by. Some of them were faces that were strange and some were neighbors who lived in other parts of the woods. Some who passed them stared in silence and some went by looking straight to the front. But there were none of them who spoke, for their

## SELECTED SHORT-STORIES OF TODAY

mother turned her eyes neither right nor left, but drove the horse on like a woman in her sleep. All was silent as the wagons passed, except the squeaking of the wheels and the thud of the horses' hoofs on the dry, packed sand.

At the edge of the town, the crowds increased and their wagon got lost in the press of people. All were moving in one direction.

Finally they were going along by a high brick wall on top of which ran a barbed-wire fence. Farther along the way in the middle of the wall was a tall, stone building with many people in front. There were trees along the outside of the wall and in the branches of one of the trees Daniel saw a man. He was looking over the brick wall down into the courtyard. All the wagons were stopping here and hitching through the grove in front of the building. But their Uncle Holly's wagon and their own drove on, making way slowly as through a crowd at a fair, for under the trees knots of men were gathered, talking in undertone. Daniel pulled at his mother's skirts and whispered:

"What made that man climb up that tree?"

Again she told him to be quiet.

"We're not to talk today," said Jim. "Papa is sick and we're not to make him worse." But his high, thin voice made his mother turn cold. She looked back and saw he had grown pale and still, staring at the iron-barred windows of the building. When he caught her gaze, his chin began to quiver and she turned back front to dodge the knowledge of his eyes.

For the two wagons had stopped now and the uncle gotten down and left them sitting alone while he went to the door of the building and talked with a man standing there. The crowd fell silent, staring at their mother.

"See, Jim, all the men up the trees!" Daniel whispered once more, leaning close in to his brother's side.

"Hush, Dan'l. Be still."

The young boy obeyed this time, falling into a bewildered stare at all the things about him he did not understand, for in all the trees along the brick wall men began to appear perched

## A TRIP TO CZARDIS

high in the branches, and on the roof of a building across the way stood other men, all gaping at something in the yard back of the wall.

Their uncle returned and hitched his horse to a ring in one of the trees. Then he hitched their mother's horse and all of them got out and stood on the ground in a huddle. The walls of the building rose before them. Strange faces at the barred windows laughed aloud and called down curses at the men below.

Now they were moving, with a wall of faces on either side of them, their uncle going first, followed by their mother who held to each of them by a hand. They went up the steps of the building. The door opened and their uncle stepped inside. He came back in a moment and all of them went in and followed a man down a corridor and into a bare room with two chairs and a wooden bench. A man in a black robe sat on one of the chairs, and in front of him on the bench, leaning forward looking down between his arms, sat their father. His face was lean and gray, which made him look very tall. But his hair was black, and his eyes were blue and mild and strange as he stood up and held the two sons against his body while he stooped his head to kiss their mother. The man in black left the room and walked up and down outside in the corridor. A second stranger stood in the doorway with his back to the room. The father picked up one of the sons and then the other in his arms and looked at them and leaned their faces on his own. Then he sat down on the bench and held them against him. Their mother sat down by them and they were all together.

A few low words were spoken and then a silence fell over them all. And in a while the parents spoke a little more and touched one another. But the bare stone floor and the stone walls and the unaccustomed arms of their father hushed the sons with the new and strange. And when the time had passed, the father took his watch from his pocket:

"I'm goen to give you my watch, Jim. You are the oldest. I want you to keep it till you are a grown man . . . And I want

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

you to always do what mamma tells you . . . I'm goen to give you the chain, Dan'l. . . ."

The young brother took the chain, slipped out of his father's arms, and went to his mother with it. He spread it out on her knee and began to talk to her in a whisper. She bent over him, and again all of them in the room grew silent.

A sudden sound of marching was heard in the corridor. The man rose up and took his sons in his arms, holding them abruptly. But their uncle, who had been standing with the man in the doorway, came suddenly and took them and went out and down through the big doorway by which they had entered the building. As the doors opened to let them pass, the crowd gathered around the steps pressed forward to look inside. The older boy cringed in his uncle's arms. His uncle turned and stood with his back to the crowd. Their mother came through the doors. The crowd fell back. Again through a passageway of gazing eyes, they reached the wagons. This time they sat on the seat beside their mother. Leaving their uncle and his wagon behind, they started off on the road that led out of town.

"Is papa coming home with Uncle Holly?" Jim asked in a still voice.

His mother nodded her head.

Reaching the woods once more and the silence he knew, Daniel whispered to his brother:

"We got a watch and chain instead, Jim."

But Jim neither answered nor turned his eyes.

## The Tale of the White Dove\*

CARL CARMER

*Despite his widely known book, Stars Fell on Alabama, Carl Carmer was born in New York. He was graduated from Hamilton College and took his M.A. from Harvard.*

*He has taught at Syracuse University, Hamilton College, University of Rochester, and the University of Alabama. He has been columnist on the New Orleans Morning Tribune, assistant editor of Vanity Fair, and of the Theatre Arts Monthly. His interest in folk-lore gave him the inspiration and the material for his volume, Stars Fell on Alabama. He is now writing a similar book about New York State. The Tale of the White Dove, the shortest story in this book, is chosen to represent the folk legend.*

WHEN the mistress of the Big House lay dying, so the house slaves said, she raised herself on her elbow and vowed that she would come back to her home: she would come back as a white dove to her husband and to the garden where they had been happy together.

No white dove came to the garden for months nor for years. But on the day the master carried a bride inside the pillared portal the slaves heard a low grieving and in the garden, hardly distinguishable against the white blossoms on the snowball bush, they saw the white dove. Every afternoon after that, at exactly the same time, the bird appeared, uttering heartbroken moans. The slaves were frightened, they said their first mistress had kept

\* From *Stars Fell on Alabama*, by Carl Carmer. Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1934. Reprinted by permission of Carl Carmer and Farrar & Rinehart, Inc.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

her word, the whole community became excited. People began peering over the garden wall to see the dove. The bride became tearful, the master exasperated.

Finally one afternoon, gun in hand, the master strode from his house in a towering rage. As he approached the snowball bush the dove rose in the air, fluttered toward him. He raised his rifle and fired. A woman's scream sounded over the garden, and the dove flew away never to return, a crimson hole staining the whiteness of its breast. That night as he lay in his bed the master died. No one has ever known the cause of his death.



## Ten Per Cent\*

BRUCE GOULD and BEATRICE BLACKMAR

*Bruce Gould is another Iowa writer, born in Luana, educated at Grinnell College, the University of Iowa, and Columbia University, where he studied playwriting with Hatcher Hughes. He has been a reporter on The Des Moines Tribune, The New York Tribune, The New York Sun, and successively reporter, literary editor and aviation editor on The New York Evening Post. He was also dramatic critic for The Wall Street News and is now on the editorial staff of The Saturday Evening Post. During the war he served as ensign, U.S.N.R.F. Flying Corps.*

*Beatrice Blackmar (now Mrs. Gould) is also from Iowa. She collaborates with her husband in writing plays and stories.*

*Ten Per Cent dramatizes some of the exciting things that may happen to a writer's story or play before it is accepted. The literary agent is a new figure in the writing field and has considerable power over an author's destiny. This is the first of a series written by Mr. Gould and Miss Blackmar around a haughty literary broker and his "demure" girl assistant. The series has been appearing in The Saturday Evening Post during the past year and a half.*

GREEN and white flashed the lights of Jimmie Faraday's two private wires. Muted bells of three hidden telephones purred antiphonally. The inter-office phone discreetly whirred—a confidential servant coughing hesitantly before imparting a secret to the master's ear. Six of his nine-phone or-

\* From *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 28, 1933. Reprinted here by permission of Bruce Gould and Beatrice Blackmar and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

chestra had begun the overture as the curtain rolled up on another of the many-scened, somewhat cinematic days in the life of James Faraday, literary agent de luxe, ringmaster of a circus of celebrities known from here to Hollywood.

As his phones went into action, the languid form of the sole head of James Faraday, Inc., horizontally bestowed between the cushioned chair edge and polished top of his richly veneered walnut desk, stirred faintly. With the studied nonchalance of a prestidigitator, he produced the handle of a French phone from some mysterious recess below his right knee. Dandled it with nervous negligence at his ear. A breath indicated his attention, a slight groan his veto. The phone disappeared like a palmed coin.

His left hand brought up another. He listened like a deer hearing a cracking stick. His sensitive, slightly parted lips breathed forth a single word:

"Hooey!" The receiver clicked back into place.

Out popped a jack-in-the-box third.

"Hello, Ilsa. Worried? Tell papa."

For several seconds Faraday listened, his face a mobile record of the conversation, as the famous movie star poured her fabulous troubles into his ear. Occasionally his eyes rolled eloquently, as if Ilsa Krell had uttered something too preposterous for even him to believe, then he tchked sympathetically, purred benignly, interrupted at last:

"Throw on some clothes, darling, and come in to your father confessor. We'll discuss." Hung up. Tersely, to his secretary's phone: "Find out what Ilsa Krell's last three pictures grossed and give me a memo. Yep, she's temperamental again. We'll have to get Cosmic to jack up her salary another notch, I suppose. Says they don't give her good pictures. It's a laugh."

Took up the next phone:

"Now, Charlie, you know I read everything of yours the minute it comes in. I'd read it for fun, whether I was running a business or not. I put this story in my bag, to amuse me on a dull Long Island week-end. And I lost the key. To my bag, you

## TEN PER CENT

dope! Haven't been able to brush my teeth since last Friday. I've got a locksmith working on it now." As the receiver clicked back, he lifted his secretary's phone again: "Miss George, ask Miss Booth why she hasn't reported on Charlie's last piece. What does she do with her time?" Plaintively: "Why, I had to lie to Charlie!"

The black head of another phone reared up from its recessed coil. A crisp, definite voice started to pour forth what appeared to be an intricate mass of detail. Jimmie interrupted:

"Miss Booth will take the call."

The three other phones had roused into action, the used ones were reawakening. Sitting in the center of this web of communication radiating to Hollywood, Broadway, London's Strand, Berlin's Kurfürsten-Damm, Paris' boulevard ring of theaters, Faraday furiously answered one after another, scrawled memos on a huge pad with a red crayon the size of a roman candle, briskly shunted not a few to Miss Booth downstairs.

Miss Booth, Jimmie believed, loved routine as much as he abhorred it. Some authors—one of their irritating qualities—demanded attention, even when they had nothing to sell. A scandalous attitude, thought Jimmie, whose idea was that when an author had no actual salable manuscript in his hand he should be home drinking black coffee, soaking his feet in hot water, cooling his heated brow with icy cloths while fashioning masterpieces which could be readily turned into cash through the magical offices of Jimmie Faraday. Miss Booth, Faraday had discovered in the seven months she had now been with him, was divinely created to handle authors who had idly wandered from their galley benches. Such errant fellows could talk to her about their future work for hours—she never seemed to be bored. Jimmie thought her attitude quaint but, authors being what they are, perhaps helpful.

At the fifteenth phone call, opposition raised its ugly head. Jimmie's eye lit up, he galvanized into sudden energy, spoke with clipped vigor:

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

of their purse. In his pleasant moods, Jimmie thought of Miss Booth as his picador—taking from him matters which demanded attention to detail, endless discussion, wearying the victim in preparation for his fatal fountain pen. At such time he affectionately called her—though her name was Sally—"Dora."

Miss George, the perfect secretary, stood in the door.

"Would you like to go through your mail now?"

Faraday waved Miss George away.

"There's a letter from Nelson Howard—"

He waved harder. He especially did not want to read a letter from Nelson Howard—one of the few authors he had ever accepted whom he had failed to sell—at this moment of tranquility. Furthermore, in the day of telephones to any point in the world, even to ships at sea, of telegraphs, of cables, of radio, with television just around the corner, Faraday regarded letters as an anachronism. Just so, he classed railroads with the dogcart, and refused to travel except by airplane. If he was forced to write—some of his best authors were queer, backward brutes, buried themselves in the country, had no telephone, and refused to pay the delivery charge on telegrams—then Faraday wrote, answering all letters in one sentence—that and no more. If a letter couldn't be answered in one sentence, he referred it to Miss Booth, rather than spoil his record.

Miss George, just waved away, appeared again.

"Max!"

Jimmie's tone, as he lifted the receiver, was that of an indulgent father chiding a precocious child caught in the act of being too smart for his own good.

"Hello, Maxie." Faraday laughed soothingly. "Well, you lost out."

The splutters from Hollywood, at about ten cents a splutter—Max Lachmann, president of Superb Pictures, spluttered pretty fast—crackled over three thousand miles of mountain, desert, prairie land with an ease and clarity which would have made the whiskers of old Doctor Bell—had he realized that he invented the telephone so Maxie Lachmann and his pals could splutter

## TEN PER CENT

three thousand miles whenever they wished—curdle into Assyrian ringlets. An amused and impish grin stole over Faraday's face, giving him something of that faunlike quality he always wore at moments of the kill.

"Maxie, you're in form. You amuse me. How I love to make you mad."

It was obvious that Maxie was working himself into a lather of excitement, charging futilely at the agile Jimmie, who only grinned more broadly and waved his cape in a series of provocative verbal veronicas.

One of the readers entered—Jimmie never asked to be alone when he was telephoning. She laid down half a dozen manuscripts. Jimmie cocked an inquiring eye.

"Some new things. One or two good. Colossal returned that Nelson Howard script, you know, Love and Death."

Howard's name, once more bobbing up in an otherwise perfect morning, made Jimmie vaguely uncomfortable. The fellow had talent. The really swell play of his Jimmie had been unable to sell proved this. Somehow, he just hadn't clicked. Once or twice the talented unknown had tried to see him. Jimmie had shunted him off to Miss Booth. Unsuccessful authors made Jimmie uneasy; he felt he had to throw them out of his office before they broke his heart. This would be just the time to do something for Howard, when he was least expecting it.

Faraday picked up the thread of Maxie's plaint again, interrupted:

"That does put you in a spot, Maxie. So you need a picture for Nethersole? Well, maybe you'll listen to me for a change."

As if by magic, Faraday's whole manner altered. The telephone in his hand was no longer a dead black mechanism but a sensitized antenna feelingly reaching out to Maxie three thousand miles away. His enthusiasm rose like a tidal wave engulfing all before it. His eyes narrowed. The timbre of his voice deepened. Conviction charged its tone. His tongue wagged on a universal joint, his rolling lips were the wheels of juggernaut. Of necessity Maxie had to stop talking—he couldn't get a word in edgewise.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

No longer was Faraday arguing with Maxie, he was telling him.

"Listen, Maxie, there's something in your office right now that's so hot, if you'd get rid of those asbestos-brained readers, it'll make that story you lost seem like yesterday's newspaper. Nelson Howard wrote it—Howard's news—no, not Noel Coward. Listen, I haven't got time to explain who Howard is. Why, even Lew Turk says he's terrific. You'll be paying twice as much for this guy in three months—he's hot—"

Rapidly Faraday had been plucking at the files at his right elbow, hurriedly he scanned a printed report on a small card, as he rushed on:

"Listen, Maxie, I'm doing you a favor because you lost out, see. Everything's going romantic. Dese, dem and dose films are out—the public's sick of gangsters. They want to forget. You've got a chance to beat Cosmic and Colossal to the box office with a costume picture that'll make Ben Hur look like a benefit. It's got sex and love"—his voice rose high with excitement—"a woman, a queen, Maxie, going to her death for love. Love and Death. That's the title. It's terrific. Rush this through before Garbo stages her comeback. I'm telling you, Maxie, this is a gift at twelve grand—"

Somehow, Maxie had managed to squeeze in a word, but Faraday, with another glance at the card, threw him off like an open-field runner headed for the goal posts.

"You wouldn't understand it, Maxie, it's polysyllabic. Get Melroy to read it and call me back. It's a new angle on Marie Antoinette. You know, 'Let them eat cake'—well, let it pass, Maxie, let it pass. It seems she never said it anyway. She wasn't in love with Louis—not the dope, Maxie, the king. The King of France, Maxie, you know, Paris, love, glamour. Well, all the time she was crazy about some young Swede—whatdyuh mean unromantic, wasn't Lindbergh a Swede—most romantic figure of the century. No, there's no chance of turning this into an aviation picture—get that out of your head, Maxie. So, when the Revolution comes along—don't interrupt me, Maxie—it's got a knock-out climax. Every steno in the house will go for it, house-

wives will leave their dishes in the sink. She turns down everything for love and then pays for it with her life, see. That's the title, Maxie, Love and Death. Get Melroy to read it and call me back, only don't keep me waiting because Cosmic wants an option to give Katz a chance to read it over the week-end, but I'm stalling them off till I hear from you. Okay, now don't miss out on this one, too, Maxie, or I'll cross you off my list for good. Okay."

Jimmie hung up, riding the crest, beamed upon his secretary. "Mr. Howard will think you're marvelous."

"No," said Jimmie, a little sadly, "authors all believe their stuff sells on merit alone. It's not their fault," he added tolerantly, "it's just the way they think."

"Get Miss Booth," he directed. "Tell her I want her to lunch with me."

Miss George repeated the message, listened, looked up.

"She's sorry. She has a luncheon engagement."

Jimmie frowned, retreated into an attitude of practical somnolence, like a tiger backing off into the bush to think it over.

"Ask her to come up to my office, please," he said, finally.

Miss George relayed Miss Booth's reply: "The first instant she can—ten or fifteen minutes possibly."

How did she kill so much time, Jimmie asked himself irritably. If only he could teach her to follow his methods—no lost motion, dispose of things quickly.

He found himself wondering whom she was lunching with, penciled a memo with great gusto, "Members of the staff must keep lunch free in case wish to consult—if must make business appointments, inform me with whom." He felt better.

He was working well today. He had been at the top of his form while talking to Maxie, his tongue working in oil. Maxie was psychologically ripe, too, for anything he might suggest, since he had just lost out on Lips of Flame by not taking Jimmie's advice.

It was sure to break right. He might even ream eleven grand out of Maxie, for something as cold as fried potatoes in an ice-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

box. A good morning's work. Eleven hundred dollars commission. Howard would be delighted. Jimmie felt suddenly benevolent toward Howard. He savored the moment of telling him the good news, rubbed his hands briskly with pleasure. Really, he was just a good Samaritan.

Sally Booth stood in the doorway. Rather small in size and feature, except for her large, lustrous, velvety eyes, she looked, in her demure suit of soft green wool, rather like a brown-eyed Susan<sup>•</sup> on an infinitely delicate stalk. It seemed impossible that crisp, businesslike ultimata could ever issue from so gentle seeming a creature. She seemed hardly the immovable force which an irresistible body had best steer clear of if it wished to continue on through space. But Jimmie had long ago gotten over his "little girl" feeling about Sally, after several startling eye-openers.

Even so, seeing her now before him, with her auburn hair a cluster of loose ringlets under her brown hat, it was a shock to realize that she had but recently sunk the banderillas into Parton in a manner to win the approbation of the old professor himself.

She was, as usual, smiling sweetly, warmly, as if she had utter confidence that he, like all men, was a gentleman meaning to do the right thing by her, a lady; a smile which did not at all betray the fact that, if any man turned out to be not a gentleman, he would shortly find himself with a diminutive but highly adequate dirk between his ribs. Recovering himself now, Jimmie asked coldly:

"May I ask, Miss Booth, why you haven't given me a report on Charlie's latest story? I had to lie to him. I think he knew I was lying. You couldn't expect a man to believe a story like that."

"Which story, Mr. Faraday?"

"I had to tell him the script was locked. . . ."

"Oh, the toothbrush story." Sally dismissed his chagrin with pitiless kindness. "Shouldn't you change it? Perhaps it's got around." Added courteously, "Would you like a diagram of how I've spent the morning?"



## TEN PER CENT

"I haven't time."

"Then you have been busy too?" Miss Booth's tone was one of mild surprise. Jimmie looked at her, appalled, switched the subject after a moment's reproachful scrutiny, in which she met his sternly condemning eye with a gentle but unabashed liquid one.

"I do not expect members of my staff to make personal engagements for lunch, but to hold themselves in readiness—"

"It's not exactly personal."

Jimmie, coldly: "Then why the new hat?"

"Thank you, Jimmie," Sally smiled in a way that for a moment seemed not entirely impersonal, "you are very noticing. I try to look my best for business contacts as well as for friends—"

"I have just issued a memorandum," interrupted Jimmie formally, "no luncheon engage—"

"A memo couldn't be retroactive, could it? And I wonder, Mr. Faraday"—Jimmie sat alert, she was hardly to be trusted when she became so formal—"I wonder what you've done about that memorandum of mine asking for an increase in salary? I sometimes think you don't realize"—her calm tone was annoyingly reasonable—"that I'm really doing a partner's work for practically a beginner's salary. I would like more money. It would help, I think, to have my name on the door, and I really should have a full-time secretary and perhaps an extra telephone—"

"We've got thousands of telephones."

"You have, Mr. Faraday."

"Our telephone bills now—"

"Aren't they mostly your bills?"

Jimmie, thus bitterly reminded of the immense expenses incident to his large-handed way of conducting a literary agency, looked at Sally severely. He was, it appeared, nursing a viper in his bosom.

She seemed to have taken seriously her arguments for an increase in pay to which he had listened, some time back, out of pure courtesy and a sense of chivalry foreign to the best interests of business.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"You seem to forget that however much detail work you may be doing, it's selling that keeps us on the gold standard."

"Yes, but I do think being nice to clients is important too. You only like the ones who are successful. If a writer has a run of bad luck, you can't bear to see him. Writers are sort of child-like—they like to have someone hold their hand."

Jimmie bent upon Miss Booth his most superior eye.

"The nicest thing you can do for a client, my dear girl, is to sell his stuff." It was time, it seemed, she be put in her place. "Do you know what I've been doing this morning? I haven't been making luncheon engagements, buying new hats to flim-flam susceptible males, nor asking for raises so I could afford them. I've"—he trusted she got the entirely personal nature of his achievement—"I've practically sold that cold turkey, Love and Death, Nelson Howard wrote. Before tonight Superb Pictures will buy it and James Faraday, Inc., will be richer by from ten to twelve hundred dollars. That, my child, is the way to pay for new hats."

Jimmie paused to savor his triumph. He hadn't, he hoped, been hard with the girl, merely firm. She must learn. But Sally, who had been following him with absorbed interest, was now regarding him queerly. An almost Mona Lisa smile played about a mouth which ordinarily looked as harmless as a dew-pearled rose petal.

"Did you," she inquired with quiet intensity, "did you, by any chance, read your morning's mail?"

"No." Something in her tone chilled Jimmie's spine. At the sight of her cool, no longer smiling eye he could not forbear to ask further, "Why the interest in my mail?"

"Because," she said, with irritating calm, "if you had read your mail, you would have known that Nelson Howard is no longer with us."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jimmie wildly. As the lively catastrophe, if what this girl said was true, leaped to his mind, "He's got to be with us!"

"He wrote you a letter—at least he said he did in the one I

received. One of the little details," she interpolated as if merely by way of explanation, "on which I spend a certain amount of time, is reading my mail. He said he was switching agents—going to George Spoons—because we hadn't done anything for him. And besides," she leveled at Jimmie a mildly accusing glance, "besides, he said, it was impossible for him even to see you. He said he would have liked to know what you looked like before he left, but he realized that this was quite impossible as long as he wasn't one of your million-dollar-a-year authors. It appears," she found something to amuse herself in this, "it appears that he has actually lurked in doorways for a glimpse—"

"My mail—" Jimmie cried to Miss George. "I want that Nelson Howard letter. What have I got an organization for? Why wasn't I informed—"

"I asked you," replied Miss George with dignity, "early this morning if you would look at your mail, and I particularly mentioned—"

Jimmie hushed her with a gesture, whisked the letter from Miss George's somewhat agitated hand, waved her away, read: "This is to advise you that, in view—" Whenever authors went businesslike on you they got more legal than lawyers, Jimmie noted bitterly. Howard had specifically withdrawn each and every manuscript by name. He looked up at last, genuinely moved.

"Of all the foul ingratitude! After practically ramming him down Maxie's throat!"

"Howard's been with us a year, and we've done nothing for him. You wouldn't even, as he says, see him—always palming him off on me."

"You know I can't stand authors," Jimmie moaned, "who look hungry."

"Well," Sally prepared to leave him with no comfort, "I've got, as I said, a luncheon engagement, and half an hour's work beforehand."

To mask his gnawing curiosity, Jimmie became suddenly executive. "Who are you lunching with?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"I don't believe it's any of your business," answered Sally coldly. Such secretiveness made him frantic.

"Look here, young lady, you're working for me."

"That, considering my present emolument," Sally answered haughtily, "is really quite a break for you."

"My dear girl," Jimmie ignored her impertinence, "you are learning nicely, you are doing well. I'll grant that. And after you have been here a year or so, really get on to things, then you will be ready to learn the big end—the selling end. It's selling—"

"Selling," interrupted Sally smoothly. "Maybe you're right, James. Selling is where the money comes from. George Spoons will find that out when he sells Love and Death to Superb Pictures so easily. His commission," she added thoughtfully, "for that one picture, will be around twelve hundred dollars, and that, Jimmie, is somewhat more than one-third my present salary for a year."

With that she tripped lightly down the interior stairway, leaving Jimmie in a mood which is only to be described as sour.

He tried frantically to get Howard on the phone to head him off from that poacher, George Spoons. There was no answer. Jimmie felt thoroughly dejected. Never before had he made such an egregious error as to sell the wrong author.

He would, he thought bitterly, now have to divert Maxie to some other masterpiece. Possibly, he could tell Maxie that a script had just come in which was an ace. It might even be pleasant, he tried to rouse his numb enthusiasm, to entice Maxie skillfully away from Love and Death toward something Faraday, Inc., was empowered to sell.

Idly, Jimmie wandered to the window overlooking the Avenue below. Which one, if any, of those men on the sidewalk was coming up to take Sally to lunch? He picked out a short fellow with a battered hat and bandy legs, but the inconsiderate squirt turned sharply off, and Jimmie gave up the infantile game in disgust. The disappointment made him feel even more lonesome. None of his phones had rung for several minutes, either. He began to feel deserted, saw his world slipping away. Hurriedly

he called the reception room—send up anyone there waiting to see him.

"Martin Vermilyea is waiting," Emily informed him, "but he's asked for Miss Booth."

"Miss Booth!" Jimmie was outraged. "Why should everyone want to see Miss Booth? I'm running this business." Sternly, "Send him right up."

The moment Vermilyea appeared, Jimmie, with his intuitive understanding of the souls of authors, sensed that he was in trouble. And though he usually didn't like authors who were in straits, such was Jimmie's own mood of misery this morning, he was momentarily drawn to the fellow. Besides, Jimmie was rather proud of the fact that Martin Vermilyea belonged to his stable of authors. Vermilyea's stark and grim novels had been acclaimed by critics in all the civilized countries, even in Germany, as the work of a great realist. Jimmie had found it difficult to make money for Vermilyea, for the man had made a fetish of what he called, "testing his stories by life." He waved away happy endings, Cinderella themes. Life didn't happen that way, he said. In his novels his heroines invariably were ruined and destroyed themselves by drowning in otherwise unused bathtubs, or burned up in tenement fires.

Slowly, Vermilyea sat his ponderous bulk down. There was about him, as about his writing, a pachyderm quality. A rather confusing trait to people who didn't remember that an elephant can actually outrun the more fleet-looking horse.

"Well?" encouraged Jimmie.

The great realist moved uneasily in his seat. His eyes ran over the splendor of Jimmie's high-ceilinged office, his bulk seemed conscious of the down-cushioned luxury on which he sat. He made a supreme effort.

"I'm—" he began. Several telephones rang at once. Jimmie disposed of them in machine-gun order, looked up.

"What were you saying, Martin?"

"Jimmie"—the realist waited patiently while another interrupt-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

ing phone was answered, took a deep breath—"Jimmie—I'm—my rent—if I don't get some money pretty quick—"

One swift glance at the man's rebelliously confessing lips told Jimmie all the harrowing details. Martin Vermilyea wrote about steaming washtubs, squalling babies, because he lived among them, saw nothing else. The man's sincerity was appalling.

"You need dough?" Martin's speaking eyes answered before his lips could form the words. Jimmie thought quickly. His lively brain sought for the easiest way out of the cruel trap his impatience had led him into. He was too sensitive; he shouldn't let himself be troubled by starving authors. Really, it was appalling to be confronted by a man obviously against the wall. One had to do something—you couldn't just tell the man to go home and starve. Slowly one hand snared the phone. He found himself saying weakly, "All right, Martin, I'll get you some."

In a minute he had Dilts, the editor of Cosmic Pictures, on the wire. Jimmie began, clumsily at first. But soon his pure passion for selling fired his blood, ideas began to form in his brain, his tongue loosened. Like an organist whose fingers begin to feel their theme, he opened all stops, let the full volume peal forth.

"Dilts, I've got something for you this time. I've got something real. Now listen, it's Martin Vermilyea. No, I know he's never done anything for pictures before—he's too good—but he's just told me the story of his next novel. It's magnificent, Dilts! I simply sat here enthralled! He's just left the office—for an hour I never even answered a phone!

"Dilts, I think I can persuade him to let you have it as an original. Ordinarily he wouldn't look at picture money, but now he's a bit pinched and this is our chance. Everything's realism in pictures now, you know, and this Vermilyea story is right off the front page of life. Lone Woman is the title, I think—I may be wrong, I was so busy listening to the story. Sure, I know all his stories have had tragic endings, but here's the novelty—this ends happily. I'm giving you a break, Dilts—first whack. This'll be a sensation, the way you'll do it, and with Vermilyea's name to stun the reviewers.

## TEN PER CENT

"No, I'm going to let him tell it to you, Dilts. You'll go nuts about it. It's an experience, just the sort of thing you go for anyway. When will you be in? Four o'clock? I'll try to persuade him to come up; maybe I can. I'll have to have at least ten grand, Dilts, for the outline. Don't try to talk money to him, he's an artist, might make him sore; you know how they are. We'll make it one grand down today when you okay the idea after hearing it; four more when he submits an acceptable first draft, and the rest on delivery of the outline. Okay? I'll have him in at four, Dilts, if I can possibly talk him into coming—he's shy, you know. Wait till you hear it. Lone Woman—it's a natural, Dilts. Four o'clock. Okay."

Like a virtuoso anticipating a well-deserved round of applause, Jimmie hung up, spread out his hands:

"All fixed for you!"

"But, Faraday—" Martin Vermilyea was gazing at him with the glazed eye of a fish on the dining-room wall.

"There's a thousand dollars in your jeans, Martin—minus commission. Just like that." Jimmie snapped his fingers with easy gayety. "Not bad?"

Vermilyea, paralyzed, was unable to reply. The great realist seemed stunned by life in the raw as he'd just seen it pass before his eyes. The bland insouciance with which Jimmie had just sold, for ten thousand dollars, something which was not only not written but as yet not even thought up, seemed to have permanently congealed Vermilyea's slower-moving faculties. He sat staring with a sort of fascinated horror at Jimmie for minutes, before he managed, finally, to gulp:

"I haven't any idea at all—" The man's eyes seemed searching for some way of escape, though his body remained still paralyzed.

"Sure," soothed Jimmie airily, "but you've got nearly four hours to think one up."

"How could I even face this—this Dilts—"

"He'll be scared of you—a great author. You heard the build-up I gave you."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"But what will I tell him?" pleaded Vermifeya hopelessly.

"Every author's got stray plots racketing round his head. You think faster when you have to. Dilt is already half sold. If you don't say much he'll probably tell you a plot himself. It'll be old, but that's what they want."

"But I can't just imagine things. I work out my plots slowly, carefully. They have to have some facet of reality, some bit of observed life, or they don't seem real to me."

Jimmie began to feel legitimately annoyed. In a sudden burst of generosity, he had gambled on Vermifeya, expecting him to be electrified by the emergency, leap into action, go for the ten thousand as any sensible person would. Instead, the man was letting him down, visibly losing his nerve. In another minute he might even break into tears.

"Listen, Martin," Jimmie cajoled earnestly, "you've got a break. Dilt is one of the most important men in pictures. He's ready for you—you heard me prime him. It's a set-up—a thousand dollars practically in your pocket—more than you made on your prize novel, remember. All you have to do between now and four o'clock is think up some kind of a story—why, a child—"

Martin weaved unhappily in his chair like driftwood in a sea of troubles, clutched desperately at Jimmie's arm.

"I know, Jimmie, but," he looked yellow, suddenly aged, "but Lone Woman—"

The door burst open. Ilsa Krell, wafted in on a scent of gardenia as thick as blancmange, made her entrance in a flurry of sables covering the most famous torso since Theda Bara. Rushing to Jimmie, she kissed him for perhaps the length of forty-eight stills while thousands cheered, as he patted her absent-mindedly on the back.

"I can't, Jimmie, I can't go on any longer," moaned Ilsa, sinking into a chair. "They're killing something inside me." She pressed her hand just below the smooth curve of what passed for her heart. "Here!" she said.

Jimmie felt distraught. Preyed upon by a hysterical woman whose six thousand dollars a week prevented him from laying



her across his knee, and a jittery genius who collapsed like an accordion when you tried to make him a few thousand, he smiled benignly on them both as he automatically rang for Miss Booth. Something of his imperative need must have communicated itself in his ring, for almost instantly she appeared.

"Hello, Martin." She smiled on the great realist steeped in gloom, on the famous actress deep in tears, looked at Jimmie's brow knit with care. To clear the air, she asked lightly, "Why the deep consultation? Has Mr. Faraday suggested that you write a movie for Ilsa, Martin?"

The random suggestion took root in Jimmie's fertile brain. At least he could turn these two menaces to his peace of mind off upon each other.

"Ilsa." He rose, patted the actress' expensive back encouragingly. "You've been on my mind all morning. Well, I've solved your problem. Sally guessed it. I want to introduce you to Martin Vermilyea. You know he won the Osterholm prize for literature last year." Ilsa nodded almost comprehendingly. "Martin Vermilyea's going to write your next story. You've been asking for better pictures; well, I've got you a genius. Martin," concluded Jimmie triumphantly, "meet Ilsa Krell."

"How marvelous!" Turning the full power of her gray-green eyes, like spotlights, on the still-stupefied Vermilyea, Ilsa concentrated all their lure on him as if no one else existed for her in the world. "Tell me about it."

Under the resuscitating power of Ilsa's eyes, which seemed to have a close-up quality even off the screen, Martin Vermilyea began slowly to take on life. He mumbled something confusedly. Ilsa smiled as if at a scintillating epigram.

Jimmie beamed. Sally, slightly bewildered, looked a little out of breath; often Jimmie's moves were a trifle fast, even for her. Martin Vermilyea began to regain his color.

"Tell her about it at lunch, Martin." Jimmie guided them skilfully toward the door. "He's a great admirer of yours, Ilsa, never misses one of your pictures. But he thinks you ought to do something more realistic, and that's the kind of story he has in mind.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Tell him a little about yourself. He's to see Dilts at four with the outline. Talk it over with him, Ilsa, while it's still—uh—flexible. Lone Woman's the title. Between you, you can make it fit you like a glove."

Like one in a dream, as if he himself was now in a moving picture, the great realist stumbled his huge body after the lithe grace of Ilsa Krell. He turned at the door, hissed huskily to Jimmie:

"Who is Ilsa Krell?"

"Don't pretend," said Jimmie firmly, gave him a shove and clicked the door, sighing with relief.

Sally was standing ominously near by. She spoke now, indignantly:

"Martin's no one to do a thing like that to, Jimmie Faraday. He's no hack writer with a rush of memory to the brain every time you ask for an original. By four o'clock he'll be just a jelly."

However right Sally might be, Jimmie felt this was no time to admit it. Not after the Howard catastrophe. He couldn't afford two such mistakes all in the same day.

"When you know as much as I do about the capabilities of authors, young lady," Jimmie rebuked his assistant with defensive asperity, "you will probably be running your own agency instead of working for a dumb cluck like me."

Sally looked at Jimmie thoughtfully for a moment, as if she were turning over what he had just said in her mind. Nervously, Jimmie awaited her retort.

"Perhaps you're right," was all she said, turned and started slowly downstairs. A feeling of guilt swept over Jimmie.

"If it doesn't pan out," he called placatingly to Sally's disappearing back, "I'll tell Dilts that Vermilyea ate an oyster and got ptomaine poison, and Vermilyea that Dilts was suddenly called for jury duty."

Sally vouchsafed no sign that she had heard. He saw her greet a stranger in the reception room—not an author, apparently, too good looking. In a minute she went out with him, smiling as if

she hadn't a care in the world. Just that easily, Jimmie thought glumly, she could forget all about the snarled affairs of James Faraday, Inc.—the Nelson Howard jam, the Vermilyea mix-up—the instant she was alone with a good-looking man.

Long before Sally returned—apparently she was a charter member of the three-hours-for-lunch club—Jimmie's day, not to mention his digestion, had been ruined. He would, he felt sure, again have to go on a diet if things kept breaking this way. Not even the fact that Gilbert Miller was nibbling at an American play—without a single mention of Vienna in the script—nor that he was able to radio Cal Hakes on the Riviera that World Features had kicked in an additional thousand a week for his daily syndicated article, *Over the Backyard Fence*, could perk up Jimmie's spirit. It was an indication of his mood that he was eating alone, drearily spooning into himself a loathsome dish of whole-wheat crackers and Bulgarian lactone when Maxie called.

Maxie, as Jimmie had feared, was flushed with enthusiasm for Howard's lush drama, and at the first intimation that Faraday was now reluctant to sell, scented dirty work at the crossroads. He raised his nine grand offer to ten, eleven, twelve even. Ultimately, calling down objurgations on Jimmie's head, emotionally asserting that Jimmie was a man who would steal the pennies off his dead mother's eyes, Maxie offered fourteen.

Slightly touched by Maxie's groans, Jimmie asked for no more money, but sought in other ways to wreck the negotiations. He invented fantastic clauses that must go into the contract. Howard must approve every change in the script.

"Not even George Bernard Shaw," moaned Maxie, "when I saw him in London—"

"All right," interrupted Jimmie, joyfully, "I'll tell Howard that you can't—"

Maxie's instant misery of assent wrung Jimmie's heart, but he could not falter now.

"He must be billed equally with the director," he insisted sternly.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Maxie's groan could have been heard in New York without the aid of the transcontinental wire.

"Moran would never consent."

"I see your position, Maxie," agreed Jimmie instantly. "I'll tell Howard it's all off."

"Did I say I wouldn't do it?" screamed Maxie.

In vain Jimmie threw obstacle after obstacle in the way. Maxie raved, pleaded piteously, and acceded to everything, except Jimmie's suggestion that he buy another story. To that Maxie was genuinely indignant. What he took to be a threadbare plot to switch this script to Katz while palming off an inferior one on him roused his really righteous wrath. Lest he lose Maxie's friendship forever, Jimmie was hastily forced to agree to draw up the contract immediately and send it around to the New York office for signature.

"I'll call Herman to tell him to expect it," were Maxie's final warning words. "No monkeyshines."

Frantically, Jimmie attempted once more to get in touch with Howard, but the home phone, as in the morning, returned no answer. At Jimmie's instigation, Miss George, impersonating the author's aged mother, even called up George Spoon's office to learn the whereabouts of her errant son. But after a rather suspicious delay the aged Mrs. Howard, very creditably done by the talented secretary, was informed that her son had not been in to-day.

"Liars," moaned Jimmie, certain that Spoons—such information flew on wings in the trade—had somehow got wind of Maxie's interest in *Love and Death*.

At his wit's end, Jimmie swallowed his pride and sent for Miss Booth. He needed desperately to consult. Miss Booth, it seemed, had just returned from her leisurely lunch. And, as she stood in the doorway in answer to his cry for help, she had the colossal nerve to be smiling. That, thought Jimmie, was one of the things wrong with women in business. Let them go out to lunch with a good-looking man and the skies could fall without their giving a damn.

## TEN PER CENT

Jimmie thought dimly of his own lunch, wheaten crackers and lactone, and the indomitable Maxie.

"I'm in a jam," he groaned.

Sally assumed an innocent, sympathetic expression. "Couldn't Martin think up an idea?"

"Martin?" Jimmie had entirely forgotten Vermilyea. "I don't have to worry about Martin for an hour yet."

"We saw them having a cocktail."

"Well, maybe it'll inspire him." Jimmie was grim. He couldn't worry about Martin now, or what Ilsa and the cocktails might be doing to him.

"Maxie won't have anything but the Nelson Howard script and he'll pay fourteen grand for it. Can you imagine? Fourteen grand for a lousy story that isn't worth four. That's what I told him, and you know what he said? 'Don't you try your shenanigans on me, James Faraday. I want that picture.' No wonder the movies are incredible."

"You're not usually so honest." Sally was actually laughing. Jimmie glowered.

"This Howard business is important. I can't have Maxie think I've double-crossed him. He'd be off me for life."

"How much difference would that make to you?"

"Well, we did over four hundred thousand gross with him last year. Figure it out for yourself."

"That's forty thousand dollars commission. I suppose you'd hate to jeopardize that?" suggested Sally Booth mildly.

Sally didn't ordinarily ask silly questions. Jimmie answered it with an inelegant snort.

"I just ask for information." So gentle was Sally's eye, Jimmie felt he had been unnecessarily rude, was on the point of apologizing, when she went on: "I want to learn all I can, because I'm thinking of following your suggestion of this morning and starting up my own agency, Sally Booth, Inc."

Jimmie stared at her with his mouth open.

"I realized at lunch today that I was simply born to be a literary agent," she continued sweetly. "After all, it's like being a

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

nurse. Authors are such children and always in trouble, women are just cut out for the job of handling them."

"It was an author, then?"

"Oh, yes. His work is in demand, too, and yet he happens to be quite free. The man who was his agent," she explained blandly, "wasn't very bright about handling him. So he left. He seemed very glad to come with me."

A sudden dark suspicion dawned in Jimmie's brain.

"Who was the man you were lunching with?"

Sally's light-hearted laugh seemed to Jimmie strangely misplaced. "That wasn't a man, Jimmie, that was my client. His name, believe it or not, is Nelson Howard. I suppose when I sell his Love and Death to-morrow he'll think I'm just a whizz. I shan't dare tell him I owe it all to you."

Jimmie knew when he was beaten. His policy was to cut losses quickly, take it on the chin and start afresh. It saved him trouble and worry in the end.

"You can have your raise," he said icily.

"And the secretary?"

"And the secretary."

"The extra telephone?"

"Two more if you like." Jimmie's generosity was not unmixed with the thought of how many more calls he could throw her way.

"How about my name on the door?"

"Okay," said Jimmie, largely. He had been going to do that anyway, so many people asked for her. "Now let's get this Howard fellow in here on the jump."

"Well," said Sally slowly, "I suppose I should be satisfied." Her tone clearly indicated that she wasn't. "I suppose it's because I had actually made up my mind to start my own agency that I'm not. Anyway, I know I wouldn't feel happy now unless you made me a partner, and of course you won't."

For perhaps the first time in his life Jimmie was at a loss for words. The girl was simply incredible. He could hardly believe that anyone as seemingly honest, as apparently ingenuous, as

straightforward and decent as Sally had heretofore seemed, could have turned into such a double-crosser, such a snake in the grass, such a—a—a—

"Business woman," suggested Sally, as if she had been reading the thoughts racing across his face. "You always told me to strike while the iron was hot," she explained sweetly. "So when I got Howard's letter I immediately got in touch with him. I'm usually down in the morning an hour or two before you," she seemed to be apologizing for her curious habits of punctuality, "so naturally I found him at home.

"Finally I managed to persuade him to have lunch with me. I went right out and bought that new hat you so much admired. I think it's darling, too. You won't believe it, but I got it for only seven dollars at a little place on Fifty-eighth. Then I just had to earn enough to pay for it at lunch.

"I tried to persuade him, but he said he was definitely through here. So then I told him I was thinking of starting out for myself. Fortunately he hadn't actually committed himself to Spoons—he'll go along with me.

"And," Sally added sympathetically, "I don't want you to think I'm raiding you, Jimmie, but I'm afraid Reynolds, Kane, Szabo, Mielhe, Barrett—maybe you hardly know some of them, though you've sold their stuff—I'm afraid they'll come along, too, with some others. They all want encouragement, suggestion, somebody's time and attention, the personal touch."

"Sex appeal," interpreted Jimmie bitterly, remembering the way Sally favored all his clients indiscriminately with her smile.

"A little," agreed Sally, wisely. "It's what makes the world go round."

"Well, of all the barefaced crooks."

"You know," said Sally, solemnly, at the scathing indictment, "I feel a little as if I'd just been knighted, with you saying that. I realize that I've gained your full respect at last."

The door opened and Martin Vermilyea burst into the room. Jimmie heart sank. As if, with his whole organization on the brink of dissolution, he hadn't enough troubles without Ver-

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

milyea flopping about in here like a chicken with its head off. He lifted his hand to phone Dilts, cancel the appointment.

"I've got it," announced Vermilyea. His eyes were excited, he was carrying his hat as if he'd run all the way from the luncheon table. "It's marvelous!"

"What," asked Jimmie cautiously, "is so marvelous?"

"The story—I've found it."

Jimmie's lifted hand dropped.

"And the beauty of it, Jimmie, the beauty of it, is that it's real! It actually happened. That's what makes me know I can handle it. It's something I can get hold of—" The man paused, breathed more slowly.

"It's Ilsa—Ilsa Krell—it's her own story. We were talking at lunch. She began to tell me the story of her life. Imagine it! That frail lovely child, brought up by a stepfather, beaten, put to work in the cotton mills at thirteen. She had to quit because the foreman—" Pain contracted his face. "Struggling on to Broadway—the temptations—the—the mistakes. The slow, powerful climb to something big and important. That's the beauty of it, Jimmie, it's unlike most of my work, it has a happy ending—that is, in a worldly sense. Because the woman triumphed, in spite of her difficulties, her heart broken, still she climbed on, to a sort of solitary, lonely stardom." His voice shook. "And the wonderful thing is, it's real, Jimmie, it's real!"

Jimmie and Sally Booth exchanged a long slow look. "So Ilsa told you that story, did she?" said Jimmie at last. "You should feel pretty much honored, Martin. She doesn't tell that story to many people."

"Isn't it magnificent? Ilsa sees it too. When I told her I was going to Dilts with exactly the story she had told me, she was thrilled."

"I can see," said Jimmie, pursing his lips thoughtfully, "how she would be. Yes, Martin, you've hit on some great movie stuff there. Dilts will like it. But I wouldn't tell him where I got the idea, Martin. Just tell it straight. Remember, it's supposed to be



## TEN PER CENT

the plot of your next novel. They'll feel better about it if you don't disillusion them."

"I'm calling it—"

"Lone Woman," Jimmie said firmly.

Martin looked at Jimmie humbly.

"Maybe that is better than my title. I thought of calling it, The Strange Story of Hilda Sperl."

"Lone Woman," repeated Jimmie simply but firmly.

"Much better," agreed Sally.

Jimmie consulted his watch, whose tiny face simultaneously showed the time in New York, Hollywood, London and Paris. It helped in making telephone calls.

"You've just time to reach Dilts' office by four, Martin. Tell it to him while it's hot. Call it an epic at least once. As soon as Dilts has okayed it, call me back, and I'll collect. Then you can tuck a big steak under your arm and go home to write it out. Remember this is the plot of your next novel. I wouldn't even say anything about having had lunch with Ilsa Krell—"

"But she wants to star in it, Jimmie." Martin's face fell.

"Sure, sure, I know. We'll star her, all right. Leave that to me."

His face brightening, still excited, Martin rose, was hurried by Jimmie to the door.

"Lone Woman," he said wonderingly. "It expresses her very soul."

"It's a knock-out," agreed Jimmie. "I knew you had it in you, Martin."

The great realist went clattering happily down the stairs. Jimmie turned with freezing formality to Miss Booth. "Let that be a lesson to you never to underestimate the genius of your clients!" The phone rang. He picked it up, handed it over coldly, "For you."

Sally took it, said, "Just a moment, please." Looked up smilingly as she cupped her tiny hand over the mouthpiece.

"It's Nelson Howard. I did tell him to call in an hour. Said I

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

might have good news. Shall I tell him Love and Death is being sold by James Faraday and Sally Booth, Inc.?"

Jimmie nodded. There seemed nothing else to do.

"I'm a partner?"

Jimmie assented.

"Say about fifteen per cent?"

"Make it twelve and a half," amended Jimmie, "for a one-year trial period. We'll adjust if necessary."

Sally nodded. He instantly realized that ten per cent had been her goal.

"Nelson, I'm so glad you called. I want you to be the first one to know that I've decided to stay here as a partner—I'm really happier. After all, James Faraday is the finest agency in town. Jimmie was so sweet about my going. And, Nelson, isn't this grand, we've just sold Love and Death to Superb Pictures for fourteen thousand dollars. Contracts will be signed today. Quick work? Well, you see, Jimmie was really working for you all the time. He does the selling, you see, and I do the contact work—

"That's lovely of you, Nelson, but I couldn't tonight. I would be happy, though, if you'd drop in tomorrow for lunch, if you wish." Sally, mindful of the new memorandum, looked interrogatively at Jimmie, who gave frowning assent. "Yes, tomorrow I'm free. We'll have the contracts to sign, and you can tell me about your new play. See you then, Nelson."

Sally hung up, smiling, turned happily to Jimmie.

"I notice," said Jimmie, irrelevantly, "he was trying to date you for dinner."

"Yes," said Sally, demurely.

"Just what," Jimmie asked, with an effort at casualness, "just what is your interest in this Howard person?"

Sally looked surprised at the question, pondered a moment.

"About ten per cent, I guess," she answered, finally.

"That leaves you ninety per cent free?" grilled Jimmie.

"A hundred per cent after office hours," amended Sally.

"Then," said Jimmie, boldly, "how about dinner tonight?"

"Well," said Sally, "maybe I could squeeze it in somehow."

## "They Will Be Married in April"\*

SARAH-ELIZABETH RODGER

*Sarah-Elizabeth Rodger (Mrs. Clement Henry, Jr.) was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and now lives in New York City, where she was graduated from Barnard College. She has had poems and stories in various publications, including Harper's Magazine, Scribner's, Columbia Copy, and the women's magazines, where she has a large following. She specializes in the story of young love and the débutante's problems and thrills. Here we have four "debs" in one tale.*

HARRIET was first. Even though she had walked twice around the block, her thin legs whipped by the wind and her nose reddening, she was still the first. It was a very usual thing and she tried to dismiss the sick little feeling that always came when she realized anew that she would never be as casual as the others—that she would be on time to engagements, that she could never laugh except from nervousness, and that she was even a little afraid of the girls she was patiently waiting for.

The head waiter seated her in the most comfortable chair in the small lobby, because she was, after all, a Brevoort, however unattractive—and he rubbed his hands and said—as he always said, that undoubtedly Mademoiselle's friends would soon be here and that he was saving a very fine table—a table by the window which commanded a so-excellent view of both the whole dining room and the Avenue outside. Harriet nodded mechanically and sat. She sat like the tall, awkward girl she was,

\*From *McCall's Magazine*, June, 1934. Reprinted here by permission of Sarah-Elizabeth Rodger.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

her hands plucking at her sensible woollen dress and patting her hair and twisting her pearl necklace. It was a quarter of an hour before any of the group joined her.

"Look at that girl in the corridor," said Mrs. Hamilton Drake to the friend she was lunching with. "She's Harriet Brevoort, poor child. She's had such a wretched season, and you know what girls expect of their *débutante* year! It embarrasses me to see her, I simply can't get my boys to dance with her. And, my dear—" Mrs. Drake lowered her voice to almost a whisper—"I've heard people say poor Harriet stays in the dressing room as long as she dares and talks *hours* with the attendants—knows all about their families and their infants from Harlem to the slums—"

Harriet was uncomfortably aware that the smartly-dressed ladies at that table for two were talking about her. She wasn't sure that she knew them, but probably they were friends of her Aunt Emily's. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but their lowered voices and averted faces added to her agony of self-consciousness. She twisted her necklace over and over, crushed her handkerchief in the cold palm of her hand, fidgeted in her chair. It was a relief when Joan came—Joan who had always terrified her with her cool nonchalance and her unbelievable beauty.

"My dear, am I early?" They kissed, Joan's fresh cold cheek touching Harriet's burning one in a brief, perfunctory contact. "Where are the others?" Before Harriet had time to answer, she went on, "Well, of course, they would be late. Bette says it takes Mary Dean about two hours to dress herself, an hour and a half with expert help. But I must say she always looks divine. I wonder Bette lets her stay up here any longer. Don't you think it's funny? They are simply stunning together—but just because they went to Foxcroft two years ago, why should Bette take a chance on letting her men see Mary Dean?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Harriet dully. Joan bewildered her.

## "THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

They went to the table the head waiter had been saving for them.

"We might as well order for us all. I know what they like to eat, the bums." Joan smiled sweetly at the waiter and chose fruit cocktail for four to start with. "Or isn't that what you want, Harriet?"

"Thanks, it's all right." Harriet was cold and would have liked some hot bouillon, but something in her made her always take what the others did.

Joan looked coolly around the dining room, nodding here and there to people she knew. On Mrs. Drake she bestowed a radiant smile.

"Mamma is dying to have me marry that woman's tiresome son," she told Harriet confidentially. "Do you know him?"

"No."

"Hamilton Drake, Junior—that's her eldest."

Harriet remembered with pain. He was the boy who had stared at her rudely from the stagline at one party during the Thanksgiving holidays, and whispered audibly to a fellow stag, "Who's the beanpole?"

"I won't marry him, but Mamma thinks I will." Joan paled a little and said nothing more for at least two minutes. She hugged to herself the breathless, heart-stopping thought that now she need never marry anyone that Mamma picked out for her—and with it the cold, sick fear of telling Mamma or anyone, even this poor, harmless Harriet, her secret.

Harriet looked curiously at Joan, wondering why the light, inconsequential chatter had so abruptly ceased, and feeling uncomfortably that it must be up to her to start it again. She swallowed hard, but the words stuck in her throat. She always swallowed before she spoke; all her life she had noticed with revulsion the same mannerism in her Aunt Emily. In many mirrors, her own in the brownstone house on Murray Hill, the huge full-length one at the Ritz, this oval one in Sherry's, the gleaming, triple-glassed dressing table at Joan's—countless mirrors—she had for years observed with an ache at her heart that

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

she *was* a younger Aunt Emily. Her height and her graceless slenderness, the bony structure of her neck. . . . "I can't bear it," she thought sometimes, a little mad in these intervals. "I'll kill myself rather than see Aunt Emily all over again in all the mirrors in the world! Rather than inherit Aunt Emily's house and her garnet ring and brooch and the sickness she must have in her soul—"

But then Harriet's thoughts always petered off and she wiped her poor swollen eyes and bathed her face with cologne and went downstairs to a quiet, long dinner for two—or out to her music lesson—or to another of the parties all the débutantes of the season must be seen at, whether they were personal successes or not. With a dreary little smile at her own lack of courage, she resigned herself for the hundredth or the hundred and eleventh time to a future she had always secretly suspected. In every generation of her family there had been at least one, sometimes two or three, single ladies living in the brownstone house, kind, stupid ladies who were busy with good books and charities. Harriet herself was only a small part of the pattern—only the most recent scroll of a thousand similar scrolls, the newest stitching that was like all the preceding stitching. . . .

Probably Aunt Emily, too, in her youth had had the half-hearted pursuit of a Philip Mark—a dark, observant Philip Mark who had an eye out for the main chance—who would be not averse to driving a bargain. Harriet's name and Harriet's money in exchange for a clever husband. In all humility, Harriet was unable to blame him much. No man would marry her for any other reason; she had known it long before this winter. Making her début served to increase the confidence of a girl like Joan, marked for social success since she was a little thing; to Harriet and other Harriets it merely corroborated a thing clearly prophesied in their own minds—corroborated, and made it visible to the casual onlooker.

Without turning her head, Harriet knew that Mrs. Hamilton Drake was watching—she was conscious of the little thread of thought winding itself through Mrs. Drake's observant mind,

"THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

something like: "Poor Harriet Brevoort, she does look so plain, sitting there beside Joan. I can't think why she'd want to lunch with a popular débutante and make herself miserable hearing about Joan's conquests. My eldest is simply mad about Joan."

"Joan," said Harriet abruptly, "I'm going to ask you a funny question." She was marveling at the assurance of her own voice. Half-smiling the narrow, graceless smile of herself and her Aunt Emily, she thought ironically that she must be a very desperate person indeed to run the chance of Joan's cool, high laughter. Automatically she swallowed and began again: "Listen, Joan. You aren't to speak of this, ever. I'm trusting you. I've got to trust someone. I want to ask you a sillier question than you've ever been asked before—probably. I want to know what you would do in my place—not that you could picture being in my place, but please try."

"I'm listening," said Joan quietly. "Don't mind it so terribly, Harriet."

It was strange for Joan to speak so gently. Once she would have said, "Oh, Harriet, don't be an Airedale!"

"There's so much you won't understand about this," said Harriet. "You know my Aunt Emily—I look like her. I see it everywhere— Well, I'm inheriting the house, all her money, the—the garnet brooch. . . . In a way, I'll be inheriting her life, too. I can't bear it, Joan. But it's a pattern, preordained. But I have to break loose. No one wants me. Who could want a rag and a bone and a hank of hair—and my teeth stick out—"

"No," cried Joan softly. She could not bear the look in Harriet's eyes.

"But someone does—isn't it funny?" tittered Harriet nervously. "Someone does want me. He wants my name and the money that's coming and Aunt Emily's house. He'd like his name in the Social Register, with all the clubs I could get him in—it's so funny, Joan. Do you hear?"

"Harriet—"

"Tell me what to do, Joan! Remember, the man laughs at me behind my back, but he wants to marry me, and he'd set his

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

teeth and make a go of it—for his own good reasons. And I want to marry. I don't expect love, but I want a wedding and presents and bridesmaids. I want some reason to keep living—something that would make one day different from another, maybe. . . ." Harriet's assurance was gone now, and she looked beseechingly at Joan with the stare of a hurt animal.

"Let me think—I don't know what to say," said Joan quickly.

"You do. You had a thought right away."

"I'm afraid to say it. I'm afraid to take that responsibility."

"Say it," said Harriet stubbornly. "That was what I wanted to know."

"I—oh, Harriet, maybe I'm terribly wrong, but I'd marry the man if he wasn't too much of a cad, and if I could do it with no illusions—expecting nothing." Joan's eyes filled with tears. "I've never liked you before, Harriet. I never thought you had any feelings. I—I even thought you might be stupid. You aren't, you're a marvelous person. I hate to think of your not being happy."

"I am happy," said Harriet simply.

"Why?"

"Because you said what I wanted to hear. I'm going to marry him, Joan."

Both girls looked hastily down at their plates and began to eat their fruit cocktail as Bette and her house guest, Mary Dean Beverly, came through the revolving door and waved at them.

"They're always late, the worms," said Joan uncharitably, winking her eyes furiously.

Bette led the way toward the table. She was wearing her mink coat that had been a Christmas present from her father, and the wine-red satin dress under it clung closely to her slim waist. Her hair was dark and gleaming, barely showing under her tight little hat. She wore small pearl button earrings, and a smudge of crimson lipstick on her indefinite young mouth, and the tiny black mole at the corner of her right eye gave her a sophisticated air all her own. Joan had often called her the typical *débutante*, and she and Joan had shared honors for being



## "THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

the two most popular ones—until Mary Dean had come. . . . But Joan didn't care any more.

Mary Dean followed Bette artlessly and took the only place that was left for her.

"Hello, you-all," she nodded pleasantly. All three looked at her. She was pretty without being smart. Her bright chestnut-colored hair feathered out in little curls on her cheek, and she did not have her blue hat pulled far enough down over her right eye. It sat back on her head, framing her face. She managed to look angelic and adorable. Her powder-blue winter suit was two seasons old and its blue fox collar looked a little ratty.

"I'm awfully hungry." Mary Dean caught Bette's reproving glance and laughed cheerfully. "Oh, but I am, Bette, and I'm going to eat!" She was roundly slim, but not with the enviable svelte thinness of Bette and Joan. She never tried to diet, and her cheeks had a plump pinkness like those of a child.

"Of course, we're all poor as church mice down home," she would say, "but we get 'nuff to eat!"

"Aren't they all the sweetest things!" gurgled Mrs. Hamilton Drake to her companion at the table for two. "Except for poor Harriet, of course. But I love watching a group of débutantes together—all so gay and light-hearted. Wouldn't it be too divine to turn back the years and be coming out all over again?"

The other lady nodded and they lowered their voices and reminisced. Mrs. Hamilton Drake wanted it understood that she had been the belle of her season, not too long ago. . . .

The four girls picked at their chicken patties. Mary Dean felt a little guilty about eating hers with gusto before Bette's critical eyes, and anyhow, hungry as she was, she was almost too happy to eat. Her visit was over tomorrow, her lovely, glamorous eight weeks in New York, but in a very special sense the loveliness would never be over, never till she died—or Steel. . . . "Oh, Steel, never die, never leave me!" she begged him in her heart. She could remember the Mary Dean of two months ago only dimly, as through a mist. . . . Her family had been so happy at Bette's invitation.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

They had all turned the big, old-fashioned house in the center of Richmond upside down and topsy-turvy to gather enough clothes for her. Julia's best green evening gown, Mother's trousseau satin—ivory-colored lengths that were left over from all the lingerie that had been made for her—was debated upon and finally made into a little short-waisted, long-skirted Empire evening dress for Mary Dean. It had big puff sleeves and a low square neck. She had no fur coat to take, but she could get along without one, she said. Mother insisted firmly that then she must have a new cloth one. That, too, was made up by the dressmaker—a warm brown coat with Mother's sable scarf made into a little flat collar at the neck of it. And then Mary Dean was afraid to go. . . .

"I won't know anyone there—" she had protested.

"Inside of a week," said Mother brightly, "you'll know *every-one*."

It was true. Inside of a week Mary Dean had mastered the routine of a New York debutante's day and the technique of her evening, and she was lapping it up enthusiastically, ecstatically, as a kitten laps cream.

The night of Bette's début—when Mary Dean had been in New York only two or three days and was still blinking at the lights—she had stood receiving beside Bette in her simple little ivory satin dress with the balloon sleeves, feeling strange and dowdy and a little scared—And then, so suddenly that she was bewildered, she had been whirled off on the smooth floor, cut in on by first one boy and then another, and finally stampeded—and the next morning had been told by generous Bette, "The day of belles is still with us, it seems. My dear, you were a panic. You had a better time than I had at my own début. I'm so glad!"

Bette had been popular enough, she always was; she could afford to let Mary Dean have that warm feeling of success and excitement. Darling Bette, mused Mary Dean. If only she could do something as wonderful for her! She'd go home tomorrow and Steel would follow her in a day or so, speak to Father, meet

## "THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

all of Richmond—and they'd plan the wedding, with Bette for bridesmaid. . . . Only she could never repay Bette for the gift of meeting Steel. And Steel wouldn't let her tell—yet.

"No, darling, let's keep it a secret till you go home," he had said. "Your family ought to be the first to know, even before Bette."

But it was on the tip of Mary Dean's tongue. She wanted, suddenly, to say to these girls, "I'm engaged! I'm going to be married in April—and it's Steel, Steel. . . ." But, of course, she wouldn't tell until Steel said it was all right. She dropped her fork with a clatter.

"Don't stoop, Mary Dean. The waiter'll give you another," whispered Bette. Bette was conscious that it was silly of her to keep on caring for Mary Dean; it was only that it was a habit formed years ago at school and she couldn't break it as easily as that.

There was only one main desire in Bette's heart. She wanted to keep Mary Dean from finding out; she wanted her to leave for Richmond tomorrow with no knowledge in her clear, uncomplicated young mind of the storm she had started. Above all, Bette wanted to be remembered as the Bette of the rouged mouth, the tiny pearl earrings, and the pert mole at the corner of her eye—"the most typical débutante of 1933-1934."

There must be no hint of the Bette who lay shaken with noiseless crying, night after night in the peach and blue room next to Mary Dean's. . . . She still clutched avidly to her heart the certainty that Steel had always considered her the most attractive and the most popular girl in New York, that he still thought her so. She looked from Mary Dean to Joan and evaluated herself again. She *was* the best-dressed and most conspicuous of the three; she had more style than Mary Dean, more verve than Joan. She could have been an artist's model, a chorus girl, or a movie star if she liked—she could marry any one of twenty worth-while men in her set—she *was* brave, she told herself, and strong. . . . *Only Steel had never loved her.* He'd taken her to his Princeton proms and house-parties; yes, rushed

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

her at dances all through the season, admired her, teased her, kissed her casually once or twice during their fifteen-year-old friendship, yes. . . . "Why couldn't he have cared for me?" she asked herself desperately, over and over again during her days and nights.

It had all been so quick and so terrifying. Mary Dean arrived one week; the next week Steel was asking everyone with his diffident gray eyes, "Isn't she lovely? Isn't she perfect?" Soon he was following Mary Dean's billowing little satin Empire dress around ballroom floors, cutting in as often as good taste permitted, a little oftener. . . . Bette had spoken sharply to her mother once.

"They say Steel Havener is taking her quite seriously, isn't he? What a wonderful match it would be for the child, Bette! We must have him over often—"

"It's silly. He isn't—don't be stupid, Mother!" Bette had stammered savagely.

Not that Mary Dean had been thinking of that—not that Mary Dean cared about matches or money or eligibility, Bette knew. It was so heart-breakingly clear that Mary Dean had taken one look into the narrowed gray eyes of a Steel whose last name she did not even know—one look, and it was a sealed and secret covenant between the two. Bette was outside. Bette was only a part of the old, dull world Steel had all but forgotten. She had ceased to matter.

"You get over it in time," Bette was assuring herself all the while she and Joan discussed the smartest places to shop and advised Harriet Brevoort where she ought to go for a permanent wave. "After a long, long time, hurts like this stop hurting. In a year—even in six months—I might learn to believe that someone who wasn't tall like Steel, who hadn't Steel's eyes nor the same colored hair, was quite a nice man, even as nice as Steel. . . . I never will, of course, but I must think I might."

"Will I have ringlets like Joan's?" asked Harriet timidly of the others.

## "THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

"Naturally," answered Bette, with one-half of her mind. "René charges a lot for a wave, but it *is* a wave when he gets through with you, curls and all. You should part your hair on the other side, Harriet, and keep your ears covered."

"With no knot at the back," added Joan earnestly. "It's becoming to Mary Dean, but not to you, darling."

Harriet smiled vaguely. She was thinking that Joan had said "darling," as she called Bette and Mary Dean—that Joan was thinking of her, Harriet, in the category of the girls she liked enough to scold and advise and call "darling" or "goose."

"I've got to speak to Mrs. Hamilton Drake on the way out," said Joan abruptly. "Someone remind me, please." It wouldn't do not to stop and smile and permit Mrs. Drake to pat her hand fondly and say foolish things to her. Mrs. Drake was not one to be offended—and Joan was soon going to offend her of necessity. Not now, not today or tomorrow, but some day soon, when she could gather up the courage. It took so much courage that she ached in the mustering of it.

There was more to it than being snubbed and talked about by people like Mrs. Hamilton Drake. There was the facing of her mother with those cold, staccato words that could not in any way be softened or compromised with. . . . There were no good beginnings and no diplomatic endings, there were only the bare statements: "Mother, I haven't told you this before. I was afraid to, after all the money you spent on my party. There was no sense in my coming out. I can't marry Hamilton Drake or anybody you've been wanting me to get. I'm—I'm already married. I've been married since November twenty-ninth. My husband's name is Jones—William Jones—not the Joneses you know, but ones nobody has ever heard of. . . ." Joan's face contorted. She put her napkin against it. She coughed frantically until Harriet gave her a glass of water.

"I swallowed the wrong way," she murmured.

They believed her, all but Bette. "It hadn't anything to do with swallowing," Bette's dim, uncaring thought ran. "She's in a jam—the sort of jam you get into when you care for any one—

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

when you're fool enough to care. Probably it's that red-headed boy she's been dragging around to parties— Oh, Steel, Steel . . . let me forget about you, let me stop remembering the way you looked when you were eleven, with your ears all scrubbed for dancing school—and the snapshot you sent me from St. Paul's when you were fifteen, the one in the football helmet—Steel. . . ." Bette drank her coffee, fingers trembling as they gripped the frail handle of the cup. Then she pulled on her gloves and reached for her purse.

The four girls quarreled over the bill, Harriet insistently, Joan half-heartedly—there was not more than enough money for her own share in her new black envelope bag—Bette with a weary waving of a ten-dollar bill at the head waiter as though to summon him to take the money, poor stuff that it was, and stop the argument—and Mary Dean with a serene forgetfulness. For a moment it did not occur to her that she was not the richest girl in the town; she was unaware of the shabby fur on her suit or the slimness of her worn leather purse. Lost in the knowledge that she was meeting Steel for tea within an hour, she implored Bette and Harriet and Joan to let it be her treat. "Please do! I'd adore to give the party for once—you've all been so sweet about entertaining me." In the end, each girl paid for her own lunch and they pooled a tip, as usual.

Joan adjusted her hat more rakishly, and Bette fortified her soul with a dab of the deep crimson lipstick she affected. They led the way down the aisle of tables, with Harriet and Mary Dean following.

"Just a minute, girls, I'm going to speak to someone." Joan paused at Mrs. Drake's table and told both ladies how well they were looking and how nice it was to run across them there. Mrs. Drake pressed her hand fondly and said, "Here's my favorite débutante this season! Isn't she too sweet, Isabel? Do you choose your own frocks, Joan dear? That's a charming one." Joan replied that her mother helped her—it sounded very sweet and *jeune fille*—and she did not add that she earned her own clothes posing for advertisements.

## "THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

"You girls looked so bright and attractive at luncheon," effused Mrs. Drake. "Isabel and I were commenting on it—"

"Yes," thought Bette, who was just within earshot, "they would comment. The perfect Greek chorus for the assorted Greek tragedies . . . I wonder how many? My little private hell, Joan's whatever-it-is that makes her choke into her napkin, Harriet's wide, bright future with her complexes. . . . Only Mary Dean is left to carry out the fairy tales and the story books."

Joan escaped gracefully and joined the others.

"In a moment," she said, as they stood outside on Park Avenue saying goodbye, "she would have talked about our fresh, fragrant youth and were we making the most of it? Then she would have looked arch and murmured, 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.'"

"I couldn't have borne it if she had—I simply couldn't!" laughed Bette mirthlessly.

"She was sort of pretty and purry," remarked Mary Dean.

It was only Bette's mind that added, "Like you will be when you're her age—getting a little bit fat, a little bit comfortable, always sweet and good-natured. . . . And everyone will love you—Steel will love you—even I will love you. It's so dumb of me to keep on loving you."

Joan told Harriet in a low voice that she was terribly sorry she couldn't go on to the movies with her—that she'd call her up tomorrow or the next day, but this afternoon she must go home immediately. There was something she must see her mother about. She squeezed Harriet's cold hand.

"You'll understand," she murmured incoherently. "You'll understand very soon—it's hard, almost the hardest thing I ever did—"

Looking ahead twenty minutes, she could see clearly the ugly things written on her mother's strained, beautiful face—anger, disgust, frustration, desperation. She could hear the echoes of her mother's answering words, "Fool—your one chance

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

thrown away—lack of money—who ever heard of William Jones?—after all that's been done for you. . . .”

Nothing sustained Joan in her resolution, nothing stopped the trembling of her lips and pulses but the racing ahead of her fearful mind to its next milestone. It was hard to believe that anything so satisfying could happen, at any price, as the moment when she could reach her slim hands up Bill Jones' sturdy young shoulders and tell him she had been very, very brave, and that now she could go home with him . . . that now she could stop being Joan Wait, the silly, spoiled, unreal Joan Wait who had lain in bed till noon and danced till morning . . . that now she could walk out of the big building at Park and Sixty-fifth Street, away from the cramped little apartment she and her mother couldn't really afford, across town beside her red-headed husband and straight into the mysterious West Side that was to be her home. She must cling to the thought of that—she must walk quickly and skip the hard part—she must remember to be gentle when she told her mother, gentle as far as it was compatible with telling the exact truth. Don't hedge, don't pretend, try not to be ashamed, be conscious all the time of there being no Joan Wait any more at all, only a serene and courageous Mrs. Bill Jones. . . .

“Yes, please call me,” stumbled Harriet. She didn't want to let Joan go. Joan was so lovely and gay. It was like loosing an iridescent soap bubble from the clay pipe—it might break, it would break, and you would have nothing left. “And thank you, thank you so much.” Life stretched before her in a clear, visible path. Take the fork you want, discard illusion, expect nothing.

She was grateful in some obscure way for any choice at all. Looking on the one hand at the sober graveled walk paced to the death by her Aunt Emily, and on the other at the unexplored, twisted footpath that led to who knows where, she was grateful for an ambitious Philip Mark. It would be fun to break the pattern, fill the brownstone house with noise and laughter and quarrels and recriminations, it didn't matter. Anything was



*Ch. 1*  
"THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

better than that cold, quiet. She asked the doorman to call a taxi, and she gave the address of the hairdresser Bette had told her about. . . .

"Wait a minute, Harriet," said Bette abruptly. "Don't mind my saying this, will you? Tell René I sent you, and ask him to thin your eyebrows—they have a nice arch, you know—and get him to analyze your type and make you up once the right way so you'll get his ideas. . . . Then go to Mary Courtney's on Madison Avenue and tell her you want to know just what clothes she would choose for you for a late winter and early spring wardrobe—and get them, whether you like them or not, because they'll be perfect for you. Please do. You'll be lovely looking."

Harriet would have been offended a week ago, but now she was grateful to Bette. She thanked her and said she'd follow her advice to the letter. The taxi whisked her away.

"I don't know why I bothered," said Bette, in a tired voice. "She might have been perfectly furious with me."

"She wasn't a bit," reassured Mary Dean, "but do you think anything will make her good-looking?"

"That's the funny part of it. She'll step out of René's and Courtney's looking strikingly handsome. She has the type of looks—long face and high-bridged nose—that can be dressed up. The irony of it is that most girls like Harriet are told how homely they are as children, and they spend their lives believing it and accepting it. Wait till you see her!"

"It might change things for her, mightn't it?" said Mary Dean, with a contagious excitement.

"Rather—"

They had walked briskly to the corner, and there Mary Dean paused hesitantly.

"Do you turn off here?" asked Bette matter-of-factly.

"Ye-es. You don't mind, do you, honey? I have sort of a tea date at the Waldorf with Steel Havener. I won't be long."

Mary Dean had so many little swords, thought Bette ruefully, so very many pointed, casual, unthinking stilettos that were entirely inadvertent in their stabbing.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"No, infant"—she managed to say it lightly—"run along. See you later." She watched Mary Dean crossing the street, ignoring the lights, evading bumpers. Heaven alone knew how Mary Dean escaped death on city streets.

Bette watched, a little anxiously, until Mary Dean had reached the opposite curb. Then, holding her coat tightly around herself against the unreasonable cold, she walked swiftly up the Avenue.

"Why do débutantes invent a line?" she was thinking ironically. "You don't catch anything real with a line. . . ."

At Fifty-third Street she was aware that nothing in her whole shallow experience had fortified her against the invasions of life—nor against the bitter cold that was disappointment. She had no work she was trained to do, no ambitions, no very strong convictions—nothing.

It occurred to her that she might be distinguished from Joan or any of the other popular débutantes in her set merely by the dark sleekness of her head or the small mole at the corner of her right eye. *No work, no ambitions, no convictions*, whirled the voice in her mind. Yes, one conviction, it amended, one only.

"If I ever have a child—if I should ever have a child by one of those dozen or so men I might marry, with Steel gone," Bette told herself grimly, "and if my child were a girl, let me remember what I feel this moment. Let me remember enough to put armor on her . . . not to feed and keep her for eighteen years only for *this*. Let her eighteenth winter be merely the year between her seventeenth and her nineteenth, not the whole revolving point of her life. . . ."

Bette despised herself for the tear she could taste at the corner of her lips. "It's cold so my eyes water," she told her alert and skeptical mind, believing it not at all. But the truth was an indelicacy that the most successful débutante of the season would not face, sleeping or waking. Bette pondered on it. She compared, in a cruel comparison, the débutante at the end of her season to the middle-aged actress at the end of her career; both were through, done with. She had had her little hour of glory.

## "THEY WILL BE MARRIED IN APRIL"

Next year she could take up social service, or marry while she had decent chances, or go traveling around the world. But the enchanted winter was over, not to be recalled. She felt that she had taken the brilliant apple in her hands, polished it, gloated over it, nibbled it; then eaten its white flesh and found out the rottenness of its core. . . .

"What shall I do?" the still, small voice kept whispering. "Why wasn't I sent to college, taught to care about some one line of work, anything? What becomes of people like me when their walls crumble?"

And Bette had no answer except that this afternoon would be filled by people coming to tea, and tonight there was a dinner dance, one of the last—and she would wear her purple velvet for tea, and the mermaid-fitted silver lamé for the dinner. And so to bed. She could not even stop being flippant when she wanted to. Far ahead, she could see herself being flippant about Steel. . . . "A boy I was wild about the year I came out. One is so intense at that age, you know. . . ."

She turned in at her apartment house; there was no particular way of telling her house from the next mass except by the color of the awnings. Just as there was no way of distinguishing the girls ground out in the same mill except by the spacing of their eyes or the shapes of their heads.

A girl like Mary Dean could come in all her utter ignorance, her unsophistication, her very diffidence and make them all look silly and alike, rows and rows of exquisite, tinted dolls, having noses and eyes and mouths, to no significance. For the first time, Bette was perceiving the virtue in being born into a life that was not pampered and not easy and where you used your hands and your wits. . . .

Mary Dean was still unaccustomed to hotels. It made her feel shy and very small to walk through the lobby, but today she walked like a winged thing. Steel was not due for a few minutes, and she went into the ladies' room to comb her hair and put her hat on again, to scrub her fresh young face with soap and the wet end of a towel before she touched powder to it, to

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

take the purse-size flacon of perfume from her bag and touch drops of it to her ears and brows and the hollow of her throat.

She must be almost perfect for Steel, as nearly perfect as she could look. She felt a surge of humility because nothing in the world could be good enough for him. Then she felt the recurrent wonder that he had chosen her, before all the dazzling creatures in New York and Newport and Southampton, to be with him always. It couldn't really have happened and yet it had.

In a moment he would come and she would be sure all over again. She would realize the fairy story for the hundredth time—that Steel's love belonged not to Joan Wait, nor to Della Fairwether, nor to any of these assured, beautiful girls with their lovely clothes and their private incomes (Mary Dean had read about them often, and known Bette and two or three others at school), but to the frightened young person who had stood beside Bette in the receiving line, feeling much too quaint for the fashion in the made-over, high-waisted Empire dress with the balloon sleeves, and wondering solemnly whether, after the line broke up, anybody would ask her to dance.

She opened the door a few inches and peered out into the lobby to see whether Steel had come yet. He was there! She could see his long thin fingers flicking cigarette ashes on the tray beside him; she could trace with her eyes the curve of his jawbone and the hard breadth of his sturdy young shoulders.

She thought irrelevantly, "If he should stop loving me, if he should go away, there'd never be anyone else, nothing second-best, nothing makeshift, just emptiness. Emptiness would hurt the least."

Crossing the vast carpeted space that stretched between them, she held out her small gloved hand, which was trembling so absurdly, and murmured, "Hello, Steel."

## Strange Morning\*

KATHARINE BRUSH

*Katharine Brush (Mrs. H. C. Winans) was born in Middletown, Connecticut, educated in New Jersey, and now lives in New York City. Her widely known Night Club was published in the O. Henry Memorial anthology in 1927. Her serials and short stories appear in the magazines of large circulation, and her books are best-sellers. Strange Morning dramatizes the conflict in the soul of a child victim of divorce and second marriage. It was first published in Good Housekeeping Magazine.*

THE little boy's mother was going to be married today to Mr. Jerry Blake, who was the very tall one with brown eyes. The little boy's mother's name was Norma, and he called her that. She called him Mouse, although his name was Michael Kenyon Williams III. This morning when he woke and remembered that this was the morning, the first thing he wondered was about the names. If Norma's other name was going to be Blake instead of Williams, then was his name going to be Michael Kenyon Williams III Blake? Or what was it going to be? He ought to find out. He had to know, on account of writing it at school.

"Gret!" he shouted from his bed.

Gret was Margaret, but she didn't come. It was a funny thing. Usually in the morning she came running when she heard him, because it was winter and the windows were open and he might catch cold. He might catch cold this morning—still

\*From *Other Women*, by Katharine Brush. Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1932. Reprinted here by permission of Katharine Brush and Farrar & Rinehart, Inc.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Margaret didn't come. He shouted again, louder. She still didn't.

The conviction grew in Mouse's mind that this was a very strange morning. He became a little scared.

"I'm awake!" he cried at the top of his lungs.

That was better. That brought Margaret—Margaret's voice from Norma's room; Margaret's footsteps in the hall where the rug wasn't. She opened the door, and her round pink face and her white starched dress that was sort of fat, although not very fat, came along in.

"That's a good boy," she said. "You stayed under the covers, didn't you! I heard you calling, but I was taking some coffee to your mother. Well, and how are you this morning?"

"Very well, thank you," Mouse said. You had to say that.

• Margaret said that that was fine. She stopped beside his bed a minute and looked down at him and smiled a big smile, as she always did. She loved him very much. Mouse loved her very much, too. He smiled back.

"Look," he said. "I was thinking. Do I have to go to school today?"

Margaret seemed surprised. "Why—" she said, and then she said: "Why, yes, of course. Why shouldn't you go to school?" But she was pretending. Mouse could tell that. He could tell that she knew perfectly well why not.

"It isn't Sunday, is it?" Margaret went on. "It's only Thursday. And today's the day they're going to take you to see the Museum of Natural History—all the birds and animals and Indians and everything. You wouldn't want to miss that, would you, now?"

"Yes," said Mouse.

"You would!"

He nodded. "I'd rather go with Norma."

Margaret exclaimed that she had never heard of such a boy. Not to want to see the birds and animals—and the Indians! And the whale! They had a whale there, Margaret said. As she talked, she moved about, closing the windows and turning the heat on, and getting Mouse's bathrobe and his slippers. She

## STRANGE MORNING

talked very fast and a great deal. They had elephants in the Museum, she said, and lions and tigers, and apes, and even skeletons of awful things like dragons. The things like dragons were called dinosaurs and were enormous. Margaret talked and talked about them.

Mouse waited politely. "Can't I, Gret?" he said, when she had finished.

"Can't you what, dear?"

"Go with Norma?"

They were in his bathroom now, washing his face. Mouse himself was washing it. A man of seven, he would not let it be washed for him any more—except the ears, which were another matter. Margaret now, instead of answering him, said what about the ears? She took the washcloth from him, and the soap.

"But can't I?" Mouse repeated.

Just then Norma called from her room.

"There!" said Margaret, sounding glad. "There's your mother now. You can ask her."

So when his face and ears were clean and dry, and when his teeth were brushed, and when his hair was slick except for where the cowlicks were, where slicking never did a bit of good, he went to Norma's room.

Her door was open wide, and even from across the hall, before he got there, he could see how the room looked. It looked like going-away. He could see suitcases on chairs, and piles of things on other chairs, and shoes and tissue paper everywhere. The dressing-table came in sight, and the dressing-table bench, with Norma's leather box, that jars and bottles fitted into, waiting on it. If he wanted to, and if he asked permission first, Mouse could fit the jars and bottles in. Fitting them in was fun, like putting pieces in a puzzle. He had done it lots of times for Norma.

He didn't really want to, though, today.

He reached the threshold and looked in, and Norma saw him from her bed and smiled to him and said, "Hello, my darling!"—sort of singing it.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

Her bed was in the corner, and it was all alone. The other bed exactly like it wasn't with it any more and hadn't been since last year when they moved to this apartment. That was because it was Michael's bed, and Michael hadn't moved to this apartment from the old one, but had moved abroad, to London, England, instead.

He was called Your Daddy now, and he and Norma were divorced, which meant that they would always be great friends, Norma had said, but that they were not going to live together any more. She had explained it all to Mouse, who had explained it all to Margaret carefully, so that Margaret would understand it, too. There was a Judge, he had told Margaret, who divorced people to live apart, and so the people did—because, of course, whatever happened, you had to obey Judges. You had to do just what they said. You weren't even allowed to argue with him.

Norma hadn't had an office when Michael lived with them, but now she had one that she went to every day. Mouse had been there several times to see her. It was on the top floor of a store where you bought clothes. The top floor was not like the other floors. There was a glass door that said ADVERTISING on it in black letters, and inside there were more glass doors, and one said MRS. WILLIAMS. You knocked, or Margaret did, but you didn't wait, you walked right in, and there was Norma at a big desk telephoning or doing something. She was always very busy in her office.

She always went to it, except on Sundays, and before she went she always had her breakfast in the dining-room with Mouse. To-day was different, though. Norma was sitting up in bed, having her breakfast on her Sunday-breakfast tray. She wore a lace thing on her shoulders, tied in front with a lace bow, and all her hair was tucked behind her ears and curling in her neck. She had gold hair, though Mouse's hair was dark brown like Your Daddy's. But Mouse had Norma's eyes, everyone said.

Her eyes were gray. She had black eyelashes like feathers, and black eyebrows, little thin ones, that started to be circles and



## STRANGE MORNING

then gave it up halfway. She was beautiful. Every one said that, and sometimes people called her that, as if it were her name. Mr. Jerry Blake, for instance, often called her that. "Hello, Beautiful," he said. Michael used to say it, too.

She looked the same as usual, though this was such a different day; and Mouse felt better when he saw her. Still he didn't feel all right. Norma said, "Well, haven't you a kiss for me?" and he said yes, he had, but when he went and gave it to her it was just a small and hurried one, because he had so many things to ask and say.

"You didn't tell me you were going away," he began gravely.

"Darling," Norma said, "I'm not going very far away. And not for very long. Just for the week-end."

"But you didn't tell me."

"Really, didn't I? I meant to." Norma smiled at him. "But I was so busy telling you everything else—I suppose I forgot!"

Mouse nodded. He supposed so. She had told him a great deal, all at one time. Just the other evening, it was. He was in bed, and Norma in a shiny dress and three big purple flowers had come to say good-night to him, the way she always did; but she hadn't said it right away as she did almost always. Instead she had begun to talk to him, holding his hand.

First she had talked about being lonely here, just the two of them (and Gret); and she had asked him if he didn't think they were a little lonely; and he had said, yes, he did. He hadn't thought about it really, but they sounded lonely in Norma's voice. Then she had said something or other about Mr. Jerry Blake—Mouse had forgotten what it was, but he remembered Norma's saying next, "You like him, don't you, darling? We both like him very much." And that was true, so Mouse said yes again.

"He gave me my electric train," he said.

Then Norma talked and talked. It seemed that Mr. Jerry Blake was lonely, too, and he and Norma had finally had this wonderful idea: they would be married, and then all of them, Norma and Mouse and Mr. Jerry Blake (and Gret, of course)

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

could live together in one big apartment. Then nobody would be lonely any more—didn't Mouse see? What did he think? Didn't he think that would be marvelous? He must tell Norma. He must say exactly what he thought.

But he could not. At first he didn't seem to think a single thing. Norma was watching him, and she was worried, so he tried, but even then all he could think about was Benjamin, his dog. He said, "Could Benjamin go, too?" And Norma said, of course—of course he could! And she said Benjamin would love the new apartment, just as Mouse would, because it had a terrace all around it where they both could play.

That did sound nice. "It has?" said Mouse, to make quite sure, and Norma said indeed it had; she said it was a penthouse on a roof.

"How do you know?" he asked, and Norma said that she had seen it: it was Mr. Jerry Blake's penthouse where he already lived.

"So we would visit him," Mouse said. "Only we'd stay. We'd never come back home."

"We'll never want to," Norma smiled, "—we'll be so happy." And she said, "That will be home, you see."

"No," Mouse said suddenly, "let's not. Let's just stay here. I like it here better."

Norma stopped smiling then. She looked like crying, she was so disappointed. Mouse felt sorry for her, but he couldn't help it. He didn't want to go and live with Mr. Jerry Blake, and the more he thought of it the more and more he didn't want to. "I don't know him very well," he said to Norma. He said also, "I don't want you to be married to somebody." But he couldn't explain why when Norma kept saying, "Darling, tell me why!" It was just a funny feeling in his stomach.

It was this same feeling that he had again this morning. He hadn't thought it would come back—Norma had talked it all away the other night before she left his room—but here it was again. It had something to do with Michael, or it seemed to

## STRANGE MORNING

have. Mouse didn't know quite what it had to do with him, but something.

He looked hopefully at Norma. She might know.

"Yes, darling?" Norma said.

"I was just thinking about Michael."

The parts of circles that were Norma's eyebrows jumped up, but they came back down. "Were you?" she said. "What were you thinking about Michael?"

"I don't know," said Mouse. He hesitated. "I wasn't exactly thinking about him. I was just kind of feeling a little funny."

"Funny?"

He nodded. "About Michael," he repeated, to help Norma.

But it didn't help. At least it didn't seem to. Norma said, "Why, darling? Funny in what way? Tell me."

She put down her coffee cup and looked at Mouse, who shook his head.

"That's what I don't know," he said. "I don't know why, but I just do." He did know one thing, though, quite suddenly. "I want to see him," he said. "I want him to be here—"

"—So I could see him," was the rest of it, but this did not come out. One reason was that Gret knocked at the open door just then and said that Mouse's breakfast was all ready in the dining-room; and Norma said to put it on a tray, please, Margaret, and bring it in so Mouse could have it here and stay with her.

The other reason was his lower lip, which started wiggling. He had to stop to stop it. It surprised him very much. It hardly ever did that any more, now he was seven—except, of course, when he got hurt and had a good excuse. He was glad that Gret came in just then, or Norma might have noticed. As it was, he was all right again before she looked.

To make quite sure, he put the tassel of his bathrobe in his mouth.

"Don't, darling," Norma said. "You mustn't chew that."

"I wasn't."

Norma looked quite solemn. "But I really thought you were."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"I was just tasting of it," Mouse explained.

His breakfast came. Gret put the tray on Norma's dressing table, pushing things aside and setting Mr. Jerry Blake's big picture carefully on the window seat near by. When she had set it there she turned it to face Norma, and she smiled, and Norma's eyes smiled over Norma's coffee cup at her.

Then Mouse sat down and looked to see what kind of cereal. It was as he had feared. He sighed profoundly. Gret tucked his napkin in his neck and said that he must eat now—he mustn't hurry, but he must begin and eat, and not forget to keep on eating as he sometimes did, or else he would be late to school. Because, said Gret, it was ten minutes after eight already.

"Really, is it?" Norma said.

Gret said it was, and she and Norma began talking in a planning way about the packing, and about a hairdresser coming at nine o'clock, and about whether the drier was working properly since Gret had had it fixed, which worried Norma, but Gret said it was. Gret said that she had used the drier yesterday on Benjamin after his bath, and that reminded Norma that when Gret took Mouse to school to-day she'd better not take Benjamin, because there wasn't time. The doorman could take Benjamin. They'd better taxi, Norma said; and Gret would not forget to stop at Madame Germaine's for the hat on the way back—she wouldn't, would she? She mustn't forget that!

"Or I just can't be married!" Norma said.

Mouse drank his orange juice. He could see Norma in the mirror, and Gret's large white back and her bobbing head. They seemed happy and excited, both of them, talking away. It was as if they had a secret, only it was not a secret. . . . Mouse wished they'd hurry up and finish. This would never do. He would never get his questions asked at this rate.

He said loudly, "I don't think I'll eat my cereal today."

It worked. They stopped planning right away, and Norma looked over at him, and Gret came over. There was quite a little argument.

## STRANGE MORNING

"Well, all right," Mouse said finally. "I'll eat it if you'll talk to me. It tastes too bad for me to eat it all alone."

"Poor lamb," said Norma, smiling in the mirror. "I'm so sorry. I was just telling Margaret a few things for fear I should forget. But I'll tell her the rest later, shall I?"

"Yes," said Mouse.

Gret went away.

"Now!" Norma said. "You eat your cereal, and I'll have one more cup of coffee—though I shouldn't—and we can talk and talk, until you have to dress."

So Mouse began. There was no time to lose, he knew, and first he asked the questions that he had thought up beforehand, such as what his name was going to be, and why he had to go to school today when he would rather go with Norma to be married. He asked questions between bites and listened during.

It would have been all right, except that everything kept interrupting. The telephone rang in the middle of Norma's telling him that his name wasn't going to change, although hers was; and Norma answered it just as he said, "But then you won't sound like my mother any more!" So all the answer to that was, "Hush, darling, please, a minute. I can't hear."

He hushed, but it was longer than a minute. It was as long as finishing his cereal. He was beginning on his egg, or at least he was stirring it around, when Norma finally put the telephone together again.

"That was Boo," she said.

Boo was Mouse's Aunt Eleanor.

"Is she going with you?" Mouse inquired. "I mean, to be married?"

She was. He sighed when Norma said so.

"Everybody's going but me."

Norma made big eyes. "Why, darling, no! Nobody's going! I told you that before. Nobody except Aunt Eleanor, and just one other person—a Mr. Dudley Robbins—and that's absolutely all. Why, darling," Norma said again, sounding quite sorrowful this time, "you didn't think I'd have a real wedding,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

with lots of people there—and not take you? Well, I should say I wouldn't!"

"I wasn't sure," Mouse said apologetically.

And he still wasn't. He thought about it. "Isn't it a real wedding?"

Norma explained that it was real, but that it wasn't going to be the big, exciting kind of wedding he would like. It wasn't going to be any fun at all—that was the trouble.

"There won't be any music," Norma said, "or any flowers, or anything. It won't be in a church, you know; just in a little office. And it'll be all over very quickly. And no ice cream! Nothing to eat afterward at all! So what fun would it be for you, my darling? I can't see. That's why I thought you'd really rather go to school."

"But I wouldn't really rather, Norma," Mouse said earnestly. "Norma, I wouldn't really rather."

For a minute he thought Norma was beginning to believe him—and of course, if she believed him she would take him. Excitedly he thought that she was certainly beginning to, because she didn't smile and didn't say, "Oh, but you would!" or anything. She looked at him and didn't say a word. She must be thinking very hard, because her eyes got wet and swimming all at once.

"My precious," she said in a funny voice, "listen a minute. I—"

Gret was at the door again.

"You can't come in!" Mouse cried—rudely, he knew. He couldn't help it, though. He simply couldn't have Gret coming in just at that minute.

But Norma could. To his immense dismay she said, "What is it, Margaret?" and when Gret said it was her flowers she said, "Oh, let me see them! Bring them here!"

She turned to Mouse again.

"We want to see them, don't we, Mouse? The lovely flowers that Norma's going to wear."

It was a bigger box than usual. Gret lifted Norma's tray-with-

## STRANGE MORNING

feet away, and put the box down on the quilt on Norma's knees, and then came over for the gold nail-scissors from the dressing-table.

"Eat, now," she said. "Why aren't you eating, like a good boy?"

She took the scissors and went back again, and cut the string around the box, and Norma threw the cover off and swished the cool, thin, sea-green paper that Mouse usually loved, but that he did not think about today.

Then both Norma and Gret exclaimed over the flowers inside, and Norma said that they were gorgeous, and that she didn't think she'd ever seen such perfect orchids, and that Mouse must come and see, and that she'd better leave them in the box, she thought.

• Mouse did as he was told, but by the time he got there Norma had found the note; there was a note in with the flowers. It was a long one, like a letter, and Norma grew quite still and absent-minded when she found it, and quite busy opening it. She leaned against her pillows and began to read it right away, holding one hand against her cheek and moving her eyes fast. Even though Mouse looked and looked at her, she didn't look at him, and even when he said the flowers were beautiful she didn't, and even when he added in a clearer voice, "How many are there?" she didn't look, nor even when he started counting them.

"One, two, three—" He had an inspiration. "Or I can count them in French, if you would like to hear me. *Un, deux—*"

He felt Gret's hand, and he glanced up and saw her shake her head.

"Your mother's trying to read her letter," she said softly. "Come, now. It's time to dress now, anyway."

"Oh, no!" Mouse said. This was terrible. "Oh, no, please, Gret!" he said. "I can't come now. We haven't finished talking."

He saw Gret hesitate and look at Norma, who still didn't look. Desperately he said, "I haven't finished my breakfast yet, even!"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"I guess you've had all you want," Gret said in that same almost-whisper. "Haven't you?" Her eyes were sorry about everything. She said, "I'm afraid you'll have to come."

"But I just can't!"

Then Norma did look up, because he had made such a noise. "Why, Mouse! My dear, what is it? What's the matter?"

He told her. But it wasn't any use. He had to go with Gret. When he reminded Norma that they hadn't finished talking yet, Norma said, "Oh, but we've had a nice talk, don't you think?" And then before he could say anything, because of swallowing, she said more.

"I'll tell you what you do," she said. "You go with Gret and see how quickly you can dress. Will you do that? Because if you dress *very* quickly, and don't stop to play at all—*then* maybe we'll have time to talk again before you leave. So hurry, now!"

There never was such hurrying. He grew breathless with it, and his face got hot as summer, and he could feel his heart going bang-bang-bang. All during the underwear and socks he had Gret there to help him, and Gret kept saying she never saw a boy dress quite so fast—just like a little fireman.

"But you mustn't get excited," she kept saying. "Your mother didn't mean for you to get all nervous and excited—"

Gret was nervous and excited herself, too, though, for her voice shook, or it sort of did. She kept saying things about what they would do when he came home from school today that would be fun, and about what they'd do tomorrow, and about how on Saturday they'd have a party maybe, or a picnic somewhere with her sister's boys.

"Yes, I like picnics," Mouse said, but he didn't think about it. He said, "These buttonholes are stuck together—"

He could hear Norma talking on the telephone again, and just as he was putting on his shirt the doorbell rang again and Gret said, "Tch!" and got up from her knees and went to answer it, saying she would hurry right straight back again. But even if she did, he couldn't wait. He did his best alone—though it was very bad, he was afraid, when it was done.



## STRANGE MORNING

Still it was dressed, although not fastened in some places, and not tied. With one arm in his jacket and the other groping backward he rushed to Norma's room. She was still telephoning.

She was listening just then, and when she saw him she began to smile, and then she laughed a little; and whomever she was talking to must have asked why, because she said, "My offspring. He dressed himself this morning—evidently!"

Mouse didn't know how he could tell, but he could. He could tell by her voice whom she was talking to, and his heart sank again. It always took so long to talk to Mr. Jerry Blake. He must do something. He must do something right away. He went across and stood in front of Norma till she nodded.

"Because you promised!" he whispered piercingly.

Norma always kept promises. It was a comfort to remember that, while he was waiting. It was a great comfort to see her smiling at him all the time she kept on listening to Mr. Jerry Blake. "In a minute," her eyes said to him, and finally her voice explained that she must talk to Mouse—"say goodbye to Mouse" was just her way of putting it—and she asked Mr. Jerry Blake to hold the line a little while; or would he rather call her back in a few minutes?

"Yes!" said Mouse to that.

But Mr. Jerry Blake must have said no, because all Norma said was, "All right—just a second—" and all she did was lay the dumb-bell of the telephone down on the table with the under part, instead of on it.

"Now!" she said to Mouse. "First, let me fix you."

She reached for him, and fastened him and tied him for a minute. They didn't talk. Mouse found it hard to start the talk again. He felt so out of breath, and Norma was so busy with him, and besides, there was the telephone with both its round ears listening. He kept watching it and not saying anything.

"There," Norma said, "that's better," when she finished fixing him.

She put her arms around him and made them nice and tight,

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

so that his face was next to hers and he could hear her but not see her.

"Mmm!" she said. "I love you! Do you know that?" She was very gay. "You are my favorite gentleman," she said, "in all the world."

"I love you, too."

"And we'll be happy," Norma said. "You'll see. You mustn't worry, darling. You're not worrying, are you? Any more?"

She held him even tighter, and he could feel her waiting, wanting him to say no—no, he wasn't.

"N-no," he said. "Not about that, I'm not."

"But about something?"

"About Michael," he thought, and he tried to say it, but he could not, because suddenly the funny feeling grew and grew until it was an awful feeling, the most dreadful feeling he had ever had, as if Michael were dead. As if he would never see him again. As if he had no father anywhere—as if he had nobody anywhere but Norma, who was going away, and going to be somebody else, with a new name.

But he had Gret. Just as he thought he couldn't bear it, just as he forgot to care about being big and brave, he heard Gret going through the hall—he must have heard her, because suddenly he knew that she was there. He sobbed her name, and sobbing it again broke away and ran, blind with his tears, to where she ought to be; and there she was. He found her there, as he had known he would.

She had strong arms, and she was soft in front and comforting, and she said, "There, now. There, now. Don't you cry. Dear heart, don't cry like that!" She knelt, and hugged him hard, and sort of crooned, and sort of rocked him. She said, "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right." . . . She must have looked at Norma, because she spoke to Norma then, in a low voice.

"If you wouldn't mind, Mrs. Williams—he could go to my sister's. He loves it there. He'd have a lovely day with the two boys." And Norma must have said he could, she must have said

## STRANGE MORNING

it quickly, because then Gret said, "There, now! Won't that be nice? Instead of school?"

He nodded, clinging to her, sobbing still, but not so much now. He would be a little better in a minute. In a minute more he would stop crying; and in a minute he would go back to Norma, because Norma was his mother. . . . But just for now he clung to Gret, because Gret was his own. She was his very own, whatever happened.

## A Cup of Tea\*

MARCEL PROUST

*Marcel Proust, that undoubted genius, is one of the enigmas of literature. Strange that one who so loved the social life of Paris, as he did in his youth, should later become a recluse, venturing out only at midnight to greet a few intimates. Better than any other writer he shows the marvelous uses to which memory can be put in literature, and his vast work, Remembrance of Things Past, has affected the work of many subsequent fiction writers. A Cup of Tea is an extract from Swann's Way and is given here to illustrate the power of recollections of the past over the human mind. In itself it is a complete little story. Fortunately, Proust's final novel of the series was finished, though not published, before his death.*

I FEEL that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life.

And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the

\* From *Swann's Way*, by Marcel Proust. Random House, Inc. Reprinted here by permission of Random House, Inc.

## A CUP OF TEA

reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called "*petites madeleines*," which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a previous essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?

I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself. The tea has called up in me, but does not itself understand, and

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

can only repeat indefinitely, with a gradual loss of strength, the same testimony; which I, too, cannot interpret, though I hope at least to be able to call upon the tea for it again and to find it there presently, intact and at my disposal, for my final enlightenment. I put down my cup and examine my own mind. It is for it to discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.

And I begin again to ask myself what it could have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof of its existence, but only the sense that it was a happy, that it was a real state in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished. I decide to attempt to make it reappear. I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I find again the same state, illumined by no fresh light. I compel my mind to make one further effort, to follow and recapture once again the fleeting sensation. And that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention to the sounds which come from the next room. And then, feeling that my mind is growing fatigued without having any success to report, I compel it for a change to enjoy that distraction which I have just denied it, to think of other things, to rest and refresh itself before the supreme attempt. And then for the second time I clear an empty space in front of it. I place in position before my mind's eye the still recent taste of that first mouthful, and I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting-place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed.

## A CUP OF TEA

Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind. But its struggles are too far off, too much confused; scarcely can I perceive the colourless reflection in which are blended the uncapturable whirling medley of radiant hues, and I cannot distinguish its form, cannot invite it, as the one possible interpreter, to translate to me the evidence of its contemporary, its inseparable paramour, the taste of cake soaked in tea; cannot ask it to inform me what special circumstance is in question, of what period in my past life.

Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has travelled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell. Now that I feel nothing, it has stopped, has perhaps gone down again into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will ever rise? Ten times over I must essay the task, must lean down over the abyss. And each time the natural laziness which deters us from every difficult enterprise, every work of importance, has urged me to leave the thing alone, to drink my tea and to think merely of the worries of to-day and of my hopes for to-morrow, which let themselves be pondered over without effort or distress of mind.

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flower tea. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it, perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the interval, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks' windows, that their image had dissociated itself from those Combray days to take its place among others more recent; perhaps because of those memories, so long abandoned and put out of mind, nothing

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

now survived, everything was scattered; the forms of things, including that of the little scallop-shell of pastry, so richly sensual under its severe, religious folds, were either obliterated or had been so long dormant as to have lost the power of expansion which would have allowed them to resume their place in my consciousness. But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

And once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre to attach itself to the little pavilion, opening on to the garden, which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated panel which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. And just as the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little crumbs of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, permanent and recognisable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.



## A Shipment of Mute Fate \*

MARTIN STORM

*Martin Storm's letter of permission to use his story in this volume came from Uruapan, Mich., Mexico. My guess is that he is a mining engineer, or a geologist. Anyway, he knows about men and snakes and he asks that the bushmaster in his story be called by its proper name, *Lachesis muta*, "not mutus as is so often done." This is an adventure story guaranteed to stir the reader.*

THOUGH the *Chancay* steamed placidly from La Guayra through oily waters, that drowsy afternoon, three of those aboard her were distinctly not themselves. For their several reasons they had lost the tranquillity proper to the captain, the chief steward, and to Mother Willis.

An engineer, humming on his way to wash up, raised a black champion's fist—"Why, Mother, I'm surprised! What's wrong today with my darlin'?" He peered reproachfully into the red eyes of his veteran shipmate. Mother was everybody's pet; a stewardess extraordinary, relic and treasure, she had not missed a voyage of the old *Chancay* for fifteen years.

"Oh, it's the same thing again, Charlie— It's Clara. Mr. Bowman won't stand for an extra cat aboard, but you would think that at a time like this, when she needs the kindest care . . . How could I help it if she came to me and just asked me to take her in, last winter? I tried to find her a good private home in New York—you know that."

"She was a dirty gray skunk, poor little feller." Feeley grinned

\* From *Esquire*, July, 1934. Reprinted here by permission of Martin Storm and of *Esquire*.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

at a memory. "Mangy, too. She sat there on the anchor chain, all covered with grease and oil. I says to Bowman, 'I'm afraid we'll have that object with us henceforward,' I says, 'moths and all,' and how he swore! Then she saw you."

"Well, it's only one of the exasperating things that's happened on this sailing day. There's no reason for Mr. Bowman to roar out at her. None of the other chief stewards ever used to say a word. He's too new, that's all! And it seems so cruel just at this time. If I only had her back I'd hide her."

"Where's Clara now?"

"He dumped her right off on the mole, before we pulled out. I better go now and fix supper for that lady's baby in 109. Good night, then, Charlie, dear boy."

Feeley patted her shoulder, staring sadly after the fading lights ashore. "Officers all seems to be cranky right at the start of the run—thassa bad sign. I heard that the old man himself was bawling out Bowman, so probably that's what killed the cat. Well, don't you worry, Mother. Night."

Mrs. Willis did worry as she carefully prepared trays for three baby passengers. She thought of the piteous way Clara had just sat there, abandoned, and glared up at the ship as if too miserable to meow or even move. How could she take care of herself now, on the eve of motherhood again? Something too terrible to imagine would happen to her—and why need all this be? Exactly as Charlie had said, everyone was plain cranky, even the captain, whose business it was to be calm, no matter if a particularly special relative of the company were aboard, pestering him with requests out of order.

What Mrs. Willis did not understand was that this young Warner in his way and despite his father's still ponderous fortune, was desperately in earnest about some things—the more wishful because of physical delicacy to distinguish himself for his own nerve and brains. That was why he had spent an insect-tormented and perilous vacation in hostile jungle above the Orinoco when he could have been at Sands Point. It was why he had made a silent, thrilling vow when the assistant in zoölogy, returning to

## A SHIPMENT OF MUTE FATE

New Haven from a spring reptile hunt, remarked to the group he was tutoring that while other poisonous snakes were a drug on the market, with everybody catching them and presenting them to collections, nowhere could you see a live bushmaster. When at Easter he casually asked his father to fix him up a passage on the *Chancay*, that gentleman had no idea that his listless son was already capturing bushmasters in his dreams, though as yet he did not even know what the creatures looked like.

To catch one alive proved a grimly different matter. Once, after weeks on the land and water trail, just once, he had an appalling sight of that mute death coiled upon the forest floor, waiting for them to take the next step, then shifting toward them. No one would help him try to bag it, and presently with insolent leisure it glided back into the depths of jungle. They did not come upon another, to the relief of everybody except Chris Warner, but on the way out the Indians of one unusually ambitious village agreed to see if they could get him any old bushmaster—for an irresistible price. Days after, they returned, bearing the horror in a rubber sack. With shuddering elation he transferred it to his ready canvas.

When the Customs officers learned of the nature of this portion of his baggage, however, they would only exclaim, "Impossible!"—"It is not to be arranged, unfortunately, señor." Since nothing got him any further, Chris wired New York and then went in anxious and indignant haste to his father's employe, Captain Wood of the *Chancay*. "Skipper, I seem to be in a little jam. Last thing I ever expected, any difficulty at this stage. I've spent a whole summer and a lot of money getting a prize I can't even take home! It looks like the whole expedition's wasted, as far as my part of it's concerned—and I can't tell you how much it means to me!"

"Mighty sorry, Christopher. I just cabled your father that I'd have done it for you if I possibly could. He asked me to."

The boy looked startled at this failure of his last recourse. "But I can't see your logic. You took a jaguar up last trip."

The captain glanced over toward the Customs pier where in

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

a box with small, wire-covered openings, protected by an outer crate, his terrible passenger waited to embark. "The worst thing I know, to carry, is right there—the thing you want to take aboard a ship with women passengers. My judgment won't let me do it, even for you, son. Because something could happen, though I don't know what and there's only a chance in a thousand that it would. But those are just the things that do happen—know what I mean? I haven't a choice in the matter. Safety of passengers comes first."

"But with proper precautions? They carry snakes all the time."

"Not this snake they don't—I'd have obliged the scientists long ago—and they always want a bushmaster—if it was some other kind. Why are they so scarce, why are you so anxious now, if anybody'll transport one north? And I'm not superstitious, either, but I know what to be afraid of."

Young Warner left the cabin, seething. To be deprived at the last minute, by an old man's pig-headedness and exaggerated caution, of the one glory of his summer's labor! The unexpected obstacle chafed him intolerably. He made a hasty visit to the bank, then carefully composed a longer cable to New York. Within an hour of sailing time the captain sent ashore for him and with a face averted in displeasure laid down certain conditions. The company had cracklingly "desired" him to do this favor for Mr. Warner's son "if possible," which virtually meant, do it anyway.

"You'll have to put the thing into a box. That flimsy crate's no good."

"Tell you how I'll fix it, skipper." Chris was joyful and placatory. "The snake's got to have some air on this long hot voyage, of course, but I'll put the box with the wire-covered hole into another good stout box, quite a bit larger, with a chain and padlock. Then we can prop the lid up, just half an inch or so, with the box still locked."

"And in dirty weather the lid'll have to be fastened down tight. I'll take no chances."

"Right."

## A SHIPMENT OF MUTE FATE

"And the whole thing will be kept during the entire run in my inner cabin, where I sleep. I won't have it in the baggage room." He thought, too late, that it would fortunately have suffocated in the hold.

"Just as you say, skipper, but I was planning to stick the box under my own berth."

As the three blasts of departure sounded from the ship's whistle Captain Wood remembered what was there in his room and his skin prickled, raising up the black hair on his wrists. Then he almost forgot about it, for the steward put a chintz table cover over the mysterious object and they had fine weather through the Caribbean. Not even Chico, the captain's boy, knew that a bushmaster was aboard.

Never for one peaceful instant could Chris Warner forget it. A vague distress brooded over his pleasure in the social life of the voyage. Yet, he kept telling himself, poisonous snakes were shipped often enough—rattlers, copperheads, coral snakes, even cobras could be negotiated if some one responsible were in charge. Why was it different with a bushmaster? Why did every skipper kick, as the captain said they did—and as the scarcity of the serpents proved, even to him—about taking aboard a bushmaster? What could be worse than a cobra? "Cobras will quiet down when they know they're caught," Dr. Sutton had told him last spring. "Some get quite dopey and docile if they're left alone. But a bushmaster's always alert and hostile, even after a feeding. I like most snakes, but not them. Still, I would to God I could get hold of one!"

That sudden glimpse of the creature in the forest returned to him: he saw it lying like a richly colored, horrible mat, with an undulant, S-shaped loop, ready to strike true and instantly at anything. Often it pursued animals not its natural prey with seeming sheer malignance. It boldly followed its own occasions along trails, fearing nothing—never fled. This was the most terrible of all snakes, pantomimed the Indian guide, because it would run right after a man! The natives never attempted a cure

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

for the copious poison that flowed from those great fangs. It bore in earnest its chilling name—*Lachesis muta*.

On apparently social visits to the captain's quarters he would furtively peer in at his treasure, holding a flashlight to the wire-covered hole. Always he saw it coiled. This one was almost eleven feet long—reddish brown, adorned above with dark lozenges that showed lighter spots on either side, its rough skin glistened like a strange, beauteous fabric, the pale yellow scales on the under part revealing a porcelain glaze. He was sumptuously clad, this ominous minister of the Parcae. But the spade-shaped head was that of very Antichrist.

"You're as white as my apron, Mr. Warner. What's the matter, dear boy?" caressed Mother Willis, meeting him with a pile of towels on the way to lunch.

"Well, I didn't have such a soft time on that jungle hike, Mother. Anyway, weather like this makes you feel low." He went on into the dining-room and strove to take an interest in Roseanne Crane, who sat next at the captain's table. "You know, this is positively a peculiar ship!" she complained. "I don't know exactly what it is, but it's something solemn—even in the smoking-room. Coming down we were all so jolly—foolishness and fun every minute. These elderly new passengers must be to blame!"

"It'll be all right when we run into nice cool weather," he promised her. "They were getting ready for a hurricane last night, I guess, the way the glass dropped, but apparently it was just a false alarm. It's probably off in the Gulf of Mexico by now."

Fine days met them. The sunlit languors of the Indies vanished, and out on the open Atlantic—"Five miles deep here," an officer at taffrail murmured—played brisk winds and hurrying, foam-laced water. It was on a blowy day when the waves looked huge, yet not phenomenal, though mounted on long swells, that a monster green comber arose alone, slapped the ship terrifically to port and boarded her, racing hungrily over empty decks, carrying away a length of the rail, bashing in windows on the A-deck and falling with fury upon the exposed wheel-house of the old-

## A SHIPMENT OF MUTE FATE

fashioned liner. Water drove through closed doors and tumbled downstairs in little cataracts. Seamen were bruised and the third officer had his leg broken, being hurled across the bridge. But as the captain had ordered all passengers inside half an hour before, they were only shaken up and scared. The carpenter and the doctor went to work, the decks dried off, the sun smiled, and no brother of the awful wave crossed the subsiding sea. Ladies calmed themselves by dressing for dinner, once wardrobe trunks were righted and puddles mopped up.

At the captain's room Chico gave one look and then went to get mops and another steward to help him. It had almost been carried away, along with the wheelhouse, and water sloshed back and forth on the floor. The pillow on the bed was soaked and the mattress lay disarranged and sodden. The heavy desk had charged right across the room; a chest of drawers had fallen over, mixing bay rum with brine. "We'll be working half the night!" Grumpily they righted furniture. "Whole blooming ship's a mess, but we had to get the worst trick, as usual!"

"Poor old swivel-chair's busted for good. That desk must of carried some tonnage."

"It's what the old man's hoarded inside of it. A lifetime's plunder, if you only knew."

"God, look, what—?"

"What where?"

"Something went out over the sill then when the water sloshed. Like a hoseline or sumpin'."

"Search me. This box that the old man was so choice of, that's stove in too."

"Just put it outside. Tell him about it before it goes over."

They had been mopping for half an hour and the room was once more orderly if still very moist, when Captain Wood came in from the bridge, looking drawn and weary, and motioned them to get along.

"We got to bring you another chair, sir. That comber passed right through your bunk on its way out. There's been a good deal of damage done, sir."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Let it all go till morning—jump below. I'll lie down for twenty minutes before we run into something else." Chico thought "He's getting old" as he took the wet uniform and closed the door behind him, feeling rather sorry. He was recalled by a bellow that brought the officer on watch as well. "What in Holy Jesse have you done with the box that was under this bed?"

"It must have gone slidin' and floatin' around, captain. Anyway, something's fell on it—the bureau maybe—or the old desk charged up against it. Anyway—"

"Where is it?"

"We was just going to pitch it over. It's broke so it's no good now, captain."

"There were two boxes, one inside of the other."

"Only look for yourself, sir. Split like kindling."

The captain closed the door and alone faced a room which he believed held death. For a moment he could not stir from that one little space in the middle of the floor—where he could see. He switched on every light and took out his flashlight, but a cold and slowly mounting horror, goading his weariness into tense vigilance, half paralyzed him.

He bent over at last, drew back, waited through another interval, and then forced himself to pass the light along under the bed. With a ruler he pushed open the closet door, standing well away, but no lidless eyes reflected the searching beam. He knocked the cushions from the wall-bench, lifted up the chintz curtain, holding his revolver ready. Nothing was there. If only it had been there! If only he himself, the man responsible, could have been the first and the last to meet it!

He pulled on his heavy coat and gave an order. "Send the chief steward and the purser right up. The chief, too, if he can come. Call the first officer."

As he stood before the small, grave conference, telling them hastily what had happened, he hoped that somehow the thing might not seem so horrible to them as now it was to him. One of these resourceful and experienced men could perhaps think of something to do—together. With a plan of action made the



## A SHIPMENT OF MUTE FATE

horror would lessen. Over their heads he saw young Warner's white face appear in the open door. He told him to step in.

"It would be easier if we didn't have to let all the crew and passengers know," said the mate. "It's panic I'm scared of. That's the most dangerous thing there is at sea, in my experience. Then lots of people—the lady passengers, the ignorant black gang—they'll be sort of fanatical. Just one ordinary snake loose on board would be enough to drive the whole bunch . . ."

"Why do we have to tell?" suggested the purser.

"Think what you're saying, Mr. Kane. Who knows where it is, where it's gone? In fairness they've got to be put on guard, every one of 'em, passengers and crew."

"It might have crawled overboard."

"That's the one hope, sir."

"And then again there's not a place on the ship where it might not be, except the boilers and the galley stove. I had the Number Two hatch open, just now, to make sure no water had got through to that dry goods. It might have slid down there by this time."

"It might be in a fire-bucket, or one of the lifeboats—or a baby's bed."

Chris Warner had not spoken. He was arguing with himself, "But such a snake as that—it was so long, so awful to look at, how can it hide?" He turned hurriedly, but the captain detained him. "No one is to leave until we all decide exactly what to do."

"Captain," said Bowman, "all we can do is go now and look everywhere. I'll start now and take along a few boys I can trust for sense. Then if we haven't found anything by dark . . ."

"It's getting dark early tonight."

"Excuse me, captain—I don't think that's just." The purser was resolute. "Everyone aboard is in equal, constant danger. Everyone's got to look out for himself. Every living soul ought to be told right away. Or we might make one quick, thorough search."

"You don't know what the effect may be, to tell them—my God! I've seen passengers panicky at sea before."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"But it's right that everyone should be warned. At this minute that damned snake may be coiled under some woman's berth. We have to tell! There's nothing else to do."

"Anyway we can't make a search of the whole ship without giving reasons. Sooner or later someone will find out. We don't want it to be too late."

Captain Wood was surprised that he felt no real anger at Chris, sitting there so miserably without stirring or speaking, enduring a remorse that he alone could understand, along with the weight of the unuttered blame of the others: a feeling worse than fear. "We'll search now," he decided. "Afterward, if we have no luck, each steward will tell the passengers in his rooms, trying not to alarm them, and the officers will tell the crew. Don't worry so, Christopher—we'll give you one of the hardest places. Go take a look around the baggage room. It's been open—since?"

"Probably, sir. Some ladies usually want to get at a trunk for something, just before dinner." The chief steward was actually making some notes. His wrist shook. The peculiar dread that now informed the atmosphere seemed to render all their movements stiff. It was difficult to step freely . . . to breathe . . .

Captain Wood apportioned the ship among them, and with a strained nonchalance that puzzled passengers who chanced to be watching they moved about decks, corridors and general rooms, interested, apparently, in everything.

But no long reddish body marked with dark lozenges glided at them over the carpet nor lay coiled in a corner nor outstretched above a curtain pole. No deadly viper's head lifted from the gathering shadows. Alone in the dusky baggage room with its numberless lurking places, Chris turned sick and stood still in the middle of the floor, just as the captain had done in his cabin. Then he too forced himself to step about, to poke, to look. "This with the blame besides!" How did they know before?—How did they know that something always happens if you take a bush-master aboard a ship? What is there about this one snake . . . Trembling and sweating, he kept up the search. He did not leave

## A SHIPMENT OF MUTE FATE

one dark corner without thrusting in his long stick, always thinking that this time surely death must rush out after it.

They all met again in the captain's room. No one had found any sign. The passengers would have to be warned.

The slow nightmare that followed and grew more frightful hour by hour was rarely relieved by natural sleep. Soon they could hardly eat or rest. Fear was a heavy fog in the lungs of the whole ship's company: they dreaded to move. Only the babies played happily, not reading the terror in their parents' wakeful eyes.

But as yet it remained a quiet, freezing fear. It had not broken into panic. Then, in full sight of many passengers, two colored stokers raced along the deck and leaped yelling into the sea. They went right down in the smother. Everyone thought that they must have seen the snake, but it was not found, and Bowman decided that they had merely gone crazy thinking about it. A few hours afterward an elderly woman turned to the group beside her and remarked seriously, "If we could only get off this ship we could fumigate it." Then she, too, suddenly made for the sea, but a steward caught her. Down in her little dark inside room, which she could hardly bear to enter now, even with a bright light, Mother Willis tried to sip some good hot tea and keep going. The women passengers needed her more than ever before, and the poor babies.

Starboard on the bridge the captain stood in a whooping rain-squall and prayed into its rush. "Three days and we'll be in—Lord, let nothing happen for three more days!" A wireless to the office had brought back prompt instructions to "Keep quiet and keep coming." Such a situation lost horror, no doubt, in the safe office. Well, there was no use asking other ships for help, anyway. Short of taking off all the passengers what could they do? And then the crew wouldn't stay. To keep his head, he always tried to believe that the bushmaster had gone overboard. That, too, was what Mother Willis told hysterical women who could not spend a third night awake with all the lights on, and who yet could not sleep; who screamed at the dark. "But you don't

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

know," jabbered Mrs. Crane at her, all at once an old woman. "Nobody knows! And if anyone goes to sleep it may come through a ventilator. It may drop from somewhere. It may be in the bathroom. I can't turn my back—to anything—I keep whirling around!" The inescapable pursuit ceaselessly wore at them, and by some it could no longer be borne. A Venezuelan woman gave quieting medicine to herself and her baby until both were safe forever. "I wish I could get out of this that easy," thought Chris, ready to crack as he kept at his awful job of listening, peering, leaping back from nothing.

There were no longer nights and days. Only the light became the intolerable darkness. Some felt that they were always being watched by lidless eyes; some knew that they had heard the long body flop to the floor. For everyone it lay coiled beneath his bunk. With men calm to the sea's dangers but almost driven to run amok under the strain of this unknown, invisible horror the officers fought to keep up ship's discipline, their own minds invaded and shaken by the fanged uncertainty.

Carrying his flashlight for any treacherous corner the chief steward went at seven bells to the galley to see if all had been left neat for the night. Yes—only the watchman's coffee-pot stood on the shining stove. He turned to leave, and from the pan closet that ran along the floor to his left he saw two unwinking eyes give back the light. The bushmaster waited there among the tins, and as Bowman hesitated for an instant it began slowly to undulate over the sill, between him and the door. He could hear the faint scratching of its long scales. No heavy object that a man could move was within reach to throw at it. He carried only the flashlight. The call button was over by the door. He longed to yell but did not dare, lest any sound or movement hasten the thing after him or cause it to vanish.

The snake paused with half of its length out of the cupboard, then taking its own time emerged entirely and lay coiled like a patterned kitchen mat by the stove. With wonder Bowman perceived that it was staring not at him but past him. And some-

## A SHIPMENT OF MUTE FATE

thing else was moving, back under the sink. Despite himself he had to turn his head and look.

Slowly stepping toward the snake until she was just out of striking range came a gray, mangy skeleton of a cat. She confronted the coiled enemy, each gazing at the other with unwinking eyes.

Suddenly, and almost too quickly for sight, the bushmaster struck, and as quickly the cat evaded the lance-thrust of that spade-shaped head. Again and again it just missed her body and then as the snake began to tire a little she countered with one precise spat of a sharp-clawed paw. Now every time that the head shot out she caught it on her claws, just at the end of the lunge, bracing her absurdly meagre frame. Before Bowman grasped her strategy she had blinded the bushmaster in both lidless eyes.

It struck wildly and more rapidly, but always the countering paw was exactly there at the point and instant when its small strength could avail. The monster coiled no more, but slid after her in fury, eyes ripped, as she danced out of its way. With the agility of desperation Bowman made one leap above the melee and got his legs over the edge of the sink. Now the cat darted in among the twisting folds and fixed her teeth just in back of the great jaws; there with tooth and claw she clung. Lashing and flailing, striving to keep its crushing coils around her, the bushmaster thrashed about the galley, but both power and venom were used up; its wounds were mortal. The rough folds slackened at last.

In them Clara lay dead. Bowman saw, then, why she had challenged such an adversary and why she could not lose the fight, for out from under the sink, their tails straight as pokers, their eyes bright with curiosity, crept three new kittens. He gathered them up hastily and went with them toward Mother Willis's room.

Pazalu'k\*

GRACE KELLOGG

*Grace Kellogg has had an interesting career. She was born in Maine, was graduated from Smith College, and then went to Constantinople to teach in the American College for Women. During the vacation periods over her three-year stay there she travelled widely in Europe and Asia Minor. She now lives in Brooklyn and devotes her time to her family and her writing. She has published several novels.*

*Pazalu'k was first published by the Calvert Publishing Company, and then in the Columbia anthology, Copy, 1929.*

"**E**VERY woman, Allah knows, wants to be married. Beyim Effendim,<sup>1</sup> is it not so? For what is a woman without a husband? A dried pod, no less. The life of the woman is in her husband. Inshallah!<sup>2</sup> Women have no souls, that is understood. How, then, shall she have life except she marry that which has a soul? Beyim Effendim, is it not so?"

My friend Hassan, doubling forward, poked a dirt-grained finger under the rag strip which bound his right foot, to ease its tension or to scratch thereunder, I know not which. His mind, however, was not upon this humane act, for his brown creased face, stubbled with beard, remained upturned toward me, and his small black eyes deep with thought were fixed on my face. He is a philosopher, Hassan, and he recognizes in me the stuff of which disciples are made.

\* Reprinted by permission of the Calvert Publishing Company and Grace Kellogg.

<sup>1</sup> A courtesy title, as sir, my lord.

<sup>2</sup> God willing.

We sat at a round table in the little coffee-shop on the scala at Pasha Bagche, inhaling our sweet thick *cafe*<sup>3</sup> from miniature cups, about the size of the round end of an egg and quite as innocent of any handle. Beneath us flowed the fiery blue waters of the Bospore; overhead was the molten blue of a hot and cloudless sky. The purple festoons of wisteria on the yellow wall behind us were limp with sun. On the planks of the landing, awaiting the next boat with its probable *bakshish*<sup>4</sup> of broken *semits*<sup>5</sup> and crumbs of goats' milk cheese, lay a saffron-colored street-dog, melted out like a pool. All about us, as far as the eye could reach, hung the flaccid air in shimmering curtains of golden heat. We sat in the only patch of shade. It was ideal for philosophizing.

"Beyim Effendim, I am a practical man. Thirty years I am rowing a *caique*<sup>6</sup> for hire. It is a good business—*Mashallah*—!" He spat to the right over his little finger to avert the Evil Eye from his rash boast—"especially in the season of tourists who do not know enough to make *pazalu'k*, a bargain, and who give *bakshish* like water. All tourists are fools, for will a wise man part with money without necessity?"

Obviously not.

Hassan drew in a deep breath across his cup's brim; the *cafe* passed his lips less as a liquid than as an aroma.

"But it is a hard business, Beyim Effendim, and my limbs are no longer the limbs of a young man, nor is my back that of a donkey. When the limbs fail, the brain must bestir itself, is it not so?"

"*Tchoju'k*,"<sup>7</sup> I called, "more coffee!"

The boy lounged up to our table, took away the cups a quarter full of the black sediment that must be wasted, brought new cups smoking full of fresh coffee. Hassan received the potion absently. His mind was upon deeper matters.

<sup>3</sup> Coffee.

<sup>4</sup> Gift, contribution.

<sup>5</sup> Little rolls.

<sup>6</sup> Small rowboat, in which the rower usually stands, facing the bow.

<sup>7</sup> Boy.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Effendim, I have a wife. She is a good woman. She has borne me seven sons, all of whom, Allah grant them rahmet,<sup>8</sup> are dead. But by the revelation of the prophet, a good Moslem may have four wives, is it not so? Therefore, say I, let me take to myself another wife. But what shall I consider in this woman? Shall I consider youth? Effendim, let me be practical. I am no longer young. A young wife is a thorn in the side of an old man."

Hassan removed his battered fez from his head and mopped his dewy forehead with a sleeve. I saw that, indeed, his hair was grizzled and thin. Forty-five years, perhaps, had Hassan—an old man. Forty-five years; his back was bent, his fingers were gnarled, his teeth were but stumps between hollows.

"Effendim, shall I consider beauty? Let me be a philosopher. No longer must our women wear the veil down before their faces. Allah! Shall I take a wife whom all the young men will follow to my door?"

"No, Effendim. But let me marry a wife who shall bring me that of which I have need—money. And would one who had money and also youth and beauty condescend to me, an old and ugly and poor man? No, Effendim."

Hassan lighted one of my cigarettes. He loosened the sash that, yard upon yard, was wound about his waist.

"No, Effendim, let me choose one to whom matrimony in itself will be a boon. A woman, old, ugly, but rich. She will gain a husband, I will gain wealth. It is pazalu'k—a bargain."

He straightened back and looked at me questioningly. I nodded. A bargain—excellent.

"Have you settled on the lady?"

"Yes, Effendim."

I raised my brows, inviting the confidence.

"It is that one whom I row every day upon the Bospore in her private caique. A grand caique, Effendim, new and shining with varnish, with a red carpet on the floor and red cushions on the seats and a little flag flying from the stern. Also an awning of great merit. It is true she is a Giaour, a Christian, but how should

<sup>8</sup> Mercy.



this matter? I am broad-minded. Shall I let religion, an affair of which none but the *hojas*<sup>9</sup> in the mosques know anything, stand in the way of so admirable a union?"

I was disturbed by doubts. "Are you sure, Hassan, that she will have you?"

He nodded gravely. "She likes me. Every day when I row her in the caique, she talks to me. She asks me a thousand questions. Especially yesterday she asked me if I have all my four wives."

A wise smile wrinkled his leathery old face. "Effendim, what more will you have? She desires me. She is old, ugly, and rich. I am, it is true, old and poor, but—Erken benim—I am a man!" He rose and stretched. He settled his faded fez on his head.

"Behold! It is the hour at which I am rowing Beecher Hanum.<sup>10</sup> Even now she awaits me. Today, this very hour, I tell her of my willingness that we shall marry. Tomorrow we sign the paper. I am then a rich man, and she, Effendim Beyim, has a husband! It is pazalu'k!"

Beecher Hanum! Lingering in the excellent patch of shade, I watched Hassan roll away with his peculiar shambling gait, an expectant bridegroom but unhurried in his quest. And I lighted a cigarette, pondering, not without delight, upon the probable sensations of my friend Miss Elizabeth Disdale Beecher, Ph.D., LL.D., professor of ethnology in a world-famous university, when she should receive this proposal. Hassan, vanishing around the corner of the scala ticket-office, suddenly seemed heroic size, the eternal Adam. Rich, even learned and famous she may be, but—"I am a man; it is pazalu'k!"

<sup>9</sup> Priests or teachers.

<sup>10</sup> Lady or madam.

# The Inside Story\*

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

*Mary Roberts Rinehart, one of the most popular of contemporary fiction writers, was born in Pittsburgh. She has written many successful novels, some of which have been dramatized for the legitimate stage and for the movies, and innumerable short stories, and several plays. She is particularly known both for her detective and mystery stories and her inimitable humorous tales. Her character, Tish, became a national heroine and her escapades have provoked chuckles around the world. Mrs. Rinehart was awarded a Litt.D. from George Washington University for her literary work. She now makes her home in Washington, D. C.*

## I

ANDY blinked at the nurse through his heavy spectacles. He had no official right to blink at her, and he knew it. He had even no right to be where he was. He was there because when the alarm came and the chief barged out into the street, the only car in sight was Andy's.

"Where's my car?" shouted the chief. "And whose teakettle is that?"

"It's mine," said Andy humbly. "It's mine. And it goes. It doesn't look it, but—"

"Let's see if it goes," said the chief, and crawled in, followed by Jenkins and a plainclothes man. "Let's see how fast it can go without breaking my neck."

And in such fashion did Andy, whose real name was Andrews,

\* From *The Saturday Evening Post*, December 22, 1934. Reprinted here by permission of Mary Roberts Rinehart and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

## THE INSIDE STORY

enter the Livingstone house and the Livingstone case; the former through a dark back garden, and the latter through a pair of spectacles and a perfectly good pair of eyes. He had been accepted by the household as a part of the police group later gathered surreptitiously in the library, and, with one exception, had been ignored by the chief. That exception, however, had been brief and to the point: "Keep your car in the alley and your mouth shut. That goes until I'm ready to break this story; if it doesn't, I'll break you."

And Andy, young and lowly apprentice of crime at the 21st Precinct station house, had been only too happy to agree.

So now Andy, forgotten by everybody else, was on the top, and nursery, floor of the Livingstone house, blinking at a semi-hysterical trained nurse in a white uniform and with a cap on the back of her head, and using his own methods to restore her to normality.

"I've been wanting to ask you something ever since I saw you in the library, Miss Murray," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Everybody else has asked me questions, why not you?"

"Then tell me," he said gently, "does that cap of yours ever come off? It seems so—well, so precarious."

"I suppose you think you are being funny. That cap has stayed where it is for twenty years."

He appeared to consider that statement, still blinking at the cap. "Dear me!" he said. "You should make a note of that. It must be almost a record. But I suppose you take it off at night. Or do you?"

"If you are trying to make me angry—"

"But you are angry already, aren't you?" he inquired. "You are really extremely angry. You were angry down in the library, and you still are. Best thing under those circumstances is to get it off the chest; ask any psychiatrist." He smiled at her. "Come on now, tell papa. You'll feel a lot better."

"Why shouldn't I be angry?" she said, with rising color. "I've been the child's mother ever since he was born. Nothing ever

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

happened to him when I was around. Then I go down town on an errand and—”

Suddenly she began to cry. She was frightened then. He watched her with interest through his spectacles. She cried quite openly, without even fumbling for a handkerchief. Women only cried like that, he considered, when they had lost either all vanity or all hope.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” he said finally. “It takes so much time, and we need all we have. You went down town and—”

“She sent him out to the park with that girl. That’s all. She didn’t want him around; she never did, except to show off now and then.”

Andy took off his spectacles and wiped them. Without them he looked extremely young and very mild. He put them on again quickly.

“I see. She was like that, was she?”

“She?” The nurse laughed, not pleasantly. There were still tears on her cheeks. “They’re all like that these days. Most of them don’t even know they’re having their babies. They get a pain or two, and then somebody gives them a shot of something, and when they wake up they just say, ‘Boy or girl?’ and ask for a cigarette. It’s not normal, I say. A woman’s got to suffer for her children to value them.”

“She’s taking it hard enough now.”

“She’s scared,” said the nurse. “A lot of grief is remorse, Mr.—”

“Andrews is the name. My friends call me Andy.” He gave her a rather charming smile, but she ignored it. “How about the father?” he asked. “He like that too?”

“Better, but not too good,” said the nurse laconically. “Business all week, golf Saturdays and Sundays. Came in once in a while before dinner, if Larry wasn’t asleep.” And she added, inconsequentially: “He gave her a diamond bracelet when he was born.”

He studied her carefully. There was nothing subtle about her. Her anger was partly helpless fury at the loss of the child, and possibly, too, the resentment of the middle-aged spinster for the woman who had taken so lightly the maternity which could never

## THE INSIDE STORY

be hers. Nevertheless, she was keeping something back. She looked rather like his sister when she was hiding an unpaid bill.

He tried another tack: "They had a good many friends, I suppose?"

"Friends? Well, if you call people friends who are in and out all the time, drinking their cocktails and burning the furniture with cigarettes. No intimates, if that's what you mean. That is—"

"Yes?"

"Well, she's pretty and young, and of course there were plenty of men around."

"No one man in particular, I suppose?"

"I don't think so. They came and went."

"Nobody," he persisted, "who would know Mr. Livingstone's affairs? How much ransom he could pay, and so on."

"Ransom!" She smiled grimly. "They're in debt up to their necks. His mother has some money, but not so much any more."

"Then you don't think he was taken for a ransom?"

"How do I know?" she retorted, and rustled starchily out of the room.

He was still thinking that over when he moved to the nursery window. He had a habit of noiseless whistling when he was thinking, and now he was whistling furiously. Beneath him in the back garden, Murphy, on watch for a note thrown over the fence, was only a deeper shadow near the gate.

"Phony somewhere," he thought, blinking into the darkness. "Too many people not telling all they know, too many coincidences, and no money for a ransom. The chief's off on the wrong foot."

He felt vaguely disloyal to the chief sitting in the library waiting for the telephone call which had not come. "But the story's right here in the house," he reflected stubbornly, and once again in his mind went over that long inquisition in the library, young Livingstone wild-eyed and truculent, his wife collapsed in a corner, the procession of servants, the emotional grief of the maid, Mary Anne, and her frantic denial of any complicity. The reiteration over and over:

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"No, sir, I never saw the man before. . . . Yes, sir, the street was crowded. . . . Yes, he knew his name; he said: 'I'll carry you over, Larry,' just like that. And he told me to go ahead. Then, when I got across and turned, he wasn't coming. I couldn't see either of them. . . . Oh, yes, sir, quite a respectable-looking man."

And that was all. A middle-aged man, neatly dressed, a crowded street, a mass of cars and a missing child. They had given it up at last when the girl finally collapsed, and Andy had slid out of the room after her, too unimportant even to be missed. He had helped her to her small, rather untidy room and left her there.

Now, on impulse, he turned and went back there again. There was one question he wanted to ask her.

So now he tapped at her closed and locked door.

"Let me in, please, Mary Anne," he called softly. "It's a poor thing to be alone when you're in trouble."

"I want to be alone."

"Nobody wants to be alone when they're in trouble. Come along now, open the door. I'm not going to worry you."

He heard the girl's slow movements as she crawled out of bed, and then the key turned in the lock. She was back in bed when he entered, and the room was dark and stuffy. He threw up a window and turned on the ceiling light before he drew up a chair and sat down beside the untidy bed.

"Now listen," he said, smiling into the swollen eyes that stared at him. "Get this, my child: If you've been a good girl, nothing is going to happen to you. Nothing! That's a promise. And I believe you've told a straight story. Does that help any?"

She nodded, trying to smile.

"Good. Next, have you had any dinner?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't eat, sir."

"I'll send up some tea and toast anyhow. And now, Mary Anne, let's go over this quietly again. Tell me something about Larry. Was he a friendly child? You know what I mean. Would he go to strangers easily?"

## THE INSIDE STORY

"I don't know him very well, sir. I don't think so."

"But yet he let this man pick him up? He didn't cry out, or anything like that?"

"No, sir. I looked around before I started, and he was smiling as if he knew him."

He sat up in his chair. "You didn't tell them downstairs that the boy was smiling."

"I was frightened. I guess I forgot."

He nodded, thinking hard. "And you're sure you have never seen this man before? Not here in the house, for instance?"

She stared at him. "Here in the house? Oh, no, sir."

He promised to send up the tea and toast, and went out again. Well, that was something. If the man knew the child, that meant nothing; but if the child knew the man— After all, how many men would a child of that age be likely to know? Half a dozen? A dozen? He wondered, standing at the head of the staircase. Then he turned quickly and opened the door of the day nursery again. The nurse had come back. He found her standing idle in the center of the room, as though, like the rest, she had been brought to a sudden stop in mid-career. The whole house gave him that impression, as a matter of fact—as though the disappearance of the child had struck them all still and silent in the midst of some secret turmoil. Only the library was alive.

Perhaps that, too, was usual in such families. His only previous experience had been with the noisy grief of the humble and the poor.

"Just thought of something else," he said briskly. "I suppose this is your usual day off duty, isn't it?"

"What's that got to do with it?" She was suspicious.

"Don't answer if you don't want to," he told her. "If there is any secret about it—"

"Secret?" she blazed. "I have no secrets."

"Only the one about the cap," he said gently. "How you keep it on, and so on. By the way, I forgot to ask if you sleep in it, and how. Like the man with the beard, you know. So it wasn't your regular day out."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Day off," she corrected him. "No, if that matters. I went down town to do an errand."

"For yourself?"

"For her."

"Oh," he said, still cheerfully. "And just why didn't you tell that before?"

"What difference did it make?"

"Difference! Listen, my dear woman. Could this have happened if you had had Larry out today? No? Well, then, here's the point: Who knew, besides yourself, that you were going on those errands? In addition to Mrs. Livingstone."

"It wasn't any secret."

"But who else knew, long enough ahead to plan this thing? Now think a moment. It ought to be a man, and a man that the boy knew. That shouldn't be hard. How many men does he know? Six? Ten? Not many. But I'm telling you this: He went to somebody he knew."

"Nobody knew I was going, outside of this house," she said fiercely. "Nobody. Unless she—"

"Yes?" he said. "Unless she told somebody herself. Is that it? That's the thing you've been keeping back, isn't it? You're afraid she told somebody you were out, aren't you? And that this person—"

"I don't believe it," she said wildly. "Why would she do such a thing? It isn't true. She's young and foolish, but she wouldn't have done that."

He blinked at her, mildly surprised.

"Look here," he said. "Do you think I'm intimating that Mrs. Livingstone stole her own child?"

"That's what you said," she retorted sullenly.

"Is it? Think back."

Now, however, she was angry again. She shook her head.

"I've said all I am going to say," she told him. "And if you policemen would get out and do some honest work on this case, you might get somewhere. Standing around talking, or smoking around that telephone downstairs—and my baby gone! Get out



## THE INSIDE STORY

and bring him back. That's all I have to say. What good are you here? Don't you suppose we want him back? Do you think we've stolen him ourselves?"

"No. But I believe that is what you're afraid of," he told her; and wandered out again after his casual fashion, leaving her staring after him, alarmed and resentful.

### II

He stopped in the hall outside. On the floor below, he heard the doctor taking his departure with that spurious cheerfulness which deceives no one.

"I'll look in again in a couple of hours," he boomed from a doorway. "Probably everything will be all right by that time. Take another dose if you need it, and try to relax, like a good girl."

But as Andy moved down the stairs he saw that the doctor was not leaving. Instead he crossed the hall and threw open the door of what was apparently an upstairs sitting room. The detective had a momentary glimpse of a brightly furnished room, and of Livingstone himself standing by a table. Then the door closed.

He stopped dead. Now, that was odd, certainly. He had not seen either of the two young people since that frantic hour after the police had arrived, but he had supposed they were together. Now he recalled that they had not been together even then. The girl, white to her painted lips, had remained, sunk and strained, in a low chair. The young husband had stood facing the police with desperate eyes and an inner fury that fairly burned him.

He reflected, resuming his soundless whistling, that it must be something fairly grave which kept the two apart in a situation of this sort.

Suddenly he was conscious of the nurse at his elbow.

"The old fool," she muttered, evidently referring to the doctor. "Telling her to relax! Relax! And giving her that stuff to take herself. She knows no more about medicine than a baby."

She pushed him aside and went rapidly down the stairs, moving with a certain defiance toward the closed door the doctor had

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

left; and as the detective watched her, he saw that her face had softened. Incredible, this woman, he considered, so full of rage and even suspicion against the girl inside, and yet filled with pity. She opened the door quietly, stepped inside and closed it firmly behind her.

Thus shut out, the detective made his way slowly down the stairs and toward the back of the house. Beyond a door he heard the muffled rattling of dishes and silver, and a woman's voice, high and excited. The parlormaid's voice, he recognized. He flattened himself against the wall for a moment, looking alertly from right to left as he did so.

"Well, you can't say she isn't taking it hard, Riggs," she was saying. "I didn't know she had it in her. Nothing off this tray but a cup of coffee."

"That's not your affair, or mine," said the butler's voice. "You'd better get finished here and get to bed. No one's to leave the house tonight. Remember that."

Andy edged slightly toward the pantry door.

"I'm not wanting to get out," said the woman. "I've been fair sick to my stomach all evening. When I think of that lamb out in the night—"

"Go on. Enjoy yourself," said Riggs morosely.

"Listen, Riggs. Has she seen him yet?"

"How do I know?"

"Well, if two young people can't get together when a thing like this happens, then I'd say it's all over. . . . Don't you touch me, Riggs. What have I said? Let go my arm."

"You little fool!" Riggs said in a voice of suppressed fury. "Do you want to make things worse? This house is full of policemen. Can't you keep your tongue quiet? I've warned you before and I warn you now—"

Andy slid open the pantry door and stepped cheerfully inside. The butler, his face contorted with fury, was just releasing the maid's arm, and she was rubbing it vigorously. Both figures froze into immobility as he entered.

## THE INSIDE STORY

"Well, well," he said. "And what's the trouble here? Everybody excited tonight, eh?"

"Nothing's the trouble, sir," said Riggs. "I lost my temper, that's all. I'm not myself, and that's the truth. I suppose I am a bit worked up, sir."

"Natural enough," said Andy, blinking furiously. "We're all a trifle on edge."

The parlormaid, still rubbing her arm, slid out of the room with a vindictive glance at Riggs; and Andy sat down on a chair and lighted a cigarette. The butler eyed him glumly.

"Been here long, Riggs?"

"Ever since they were married, sir. Before that I was with his mother."

"Get along all right, do they? The young people?"

Riggs looked shocked, and Andy grinned cheerfully.

"Yes, Riggs," he said blandly. "That's what I asked. And," he added, "don't tell me it isn't nice to listen behind doors. That's what I'm paid for. Now, what's been the trouble? Don't bother to deny that there is trouble. Trouble is my business too."

The butler avoided his eyes.

"There's always talk in a house like this, sir," he said. "The servants haven't much life of their own and so they—well, you may say the life of the family has a great deal of interest for them. It's hard to avoid it, sir," he added apologetically.

"That's human nature, Riggs."

"Yes, sir. Well, there's nothing to it, of course, but lately the women have thought there was some trouble between the two of them. Mr. and Mrs. Livingstone, that is. I don't credit it myself, but—"

"But you warned that maid just now that the house was full of policemen, and to keep her mouth shut. Just so." And when the butler remained silent: "Don't be a fool, Riggs. Don't you suppose we'd get that story sooner or later? And what has it got to do with the child?"

"With the child!" The man was either a good actor or was actually surprised. "Why, nothing, sir. It was entirely a matter

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

of keeping this gossip to ourselves. If it ever got to the elder Mrs. Livingstone out in the country—"

"I see. What's this gossip about, Riggs? We needn't be squeamish. There's a good bit at stake. Or wait. I'll put it another way. Was there anybody intimate enough with this family to cause gossip? Anyone who came and went, and who knew all about the household? Think a minute. It's important."

The butler was silent. Andy shrewdly surmised that he was in doubt as to the answer, but in grave doubt as to its expediency.

"Well, sir," he said at last, "there was no one in particular, that's certain. But a good many young men came and went, and Mr. Livingstone didn't like it much. He wasn't raised to that sort of thing. His father and mother were old-fashioned people."

"About how many?"

"Maybe a dozen or so. Just foolish, you understand, sir. He would come home and—"

"That happen every day, Riggs?"

"Practically every day, sir."

"I see. I'd like the names anyhow."

But when he had got them they meant little or nothing. "Like a page out of the Social Register," he thought to himself disgustedly. "Lot of brainless young playboys, and whoever did this had brains."

He slid the list into his pocket and got up.

"So you don't think it was any one of these polo players who caused the trouble between Mr. and Mrs. Livingstone today?" he asked blandly.

"Trouble today, sir? What trouble?"

Andy grinned cheerfully.

"All right, Riggs," he said. "Hold the fort!" and went out, noiselessly whistling.

### III

In the hall he hesitated. He was uncertain as to the wisdom of recalling to the chief that he was still in the house. In the end he decided against it, and instead slipped quietly into the room across the hall from the library and closed the door.

## THE INSIDE STORY

Once inside, he inspected it through his glasses. It was lighted, but empty, and it was in perfect order.

"No party here this afternoon, that's sure," he thought. "That's curious. And nobody came after we got here. Looks as if everybody had been called off."

He reflected on that, moving about the room. In the strong upper light he could see that Riggs had been right. Here and there a scorched spot marked a forgotten cigarette, or a circle showed the mark of a glass. Hard lines on an old lady, who had given her carefully tended house to be abused in this fashion. Hard lines, too, on young Livingstone, coming home day after day to his crowded home, to slip upstairs now and then for a few minutes with his boy. Andy's face hardened. He remembered the nurse's words: "A lot of grief is remorse." Well, if this taught her anything, it might be worth it—that is, provided they found the boy.

Standing there, the house and even the street were surprisingly silent. It had been agreed that the house should be unwatched, to facilitate any effort at communication from the abductors. But Andy knew that it was only the silent center of a hurricane; that local constables and state policemen were patrolling the roads everywhere, that a determined search was going on in the city, and that a hundred, maybe a thousand, men were sitting, like the chief across the hall, over telephone instruments and waiting for news. He felt small and unimportant in the center of that network of radio, wires and armed men. Conscious, too, that he had no business to be there.

But he shook that off. "Too many coincidences," he repeated to himself, and stealthily moved out into the hall again. The door into the library was still closed, but from overhead came the muffled booming of the doctor's voice and the restless sound of young Livingstone pacing the floor.

As he stood there, however, he heard a bell ring in the pantry, followed by the butler's deliberate footsteps as he climbed the back staircase. Instantly he was on the move, and this time he had a bit of luck. The parlormaid was in the pantry, and alone.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Well, well," he said cheerily. "Aren't you working rather late tonight?"

She looked at him coldly.

"You've got us shut up in here, haven't you?" she demanded. "What did you expect? This is Mary Anne's night to relieve me, but with her lying in bed and maybe arrested—and a better girl never lived, Mr. Detective—"

"Where did you get that idea?" he asked. "Mary Anne's not under arrest. As a matter of fact, I thought I'd take her some tea and toast, if someone would get it ready. Even the best girl that ever lived needs nourishment, you know."

He lighted another cigarette while, filled with remorse, she bustled into the kitchen. His ears were alert for Riggs' return, but the butler had not come back when she reentered with a tray. Andy watched her; to all appearances, idly.

"Good place here, I suppose," he said conversationally.

"Fair. I've known better. Too much company to my taste. You get ready for four and you have eight or ten. And as for the afternoons—"

"Nobody here today, was there?"

She got a quick glance at him, but he only blinked at her owlishly through his glasses, the picture of a bored young man with nothing to do. She relaxed somewhat.

"There's a reason for that." She lowered her voice: "He cleared them all out yesterday. Came home and said he wasn't running a hotel, and his child ought to grow up in a happy home and not a free bar. Not that she drinks, but the rest of them— You'd think, to watch them, that they'd swallowed blotting paper before they came."

He gave a real whistle at that.

"And was home happy after that?"

"Not so you could notice it. He banged out and went to his club for the night. And she had hysterics. Don't say I told you this," she added cautiously. "Riggs would be crazy. But it's the truth, and I don't care what he thinks."

## THE INSIDE STORY

"Still," he said idly, "that hardly accounts for the boy being taken, does it?"

But she had said all she meant to say, and probably more. She disappeared again into the kitchen, and when Riggs came back he found only Andy there, holding a tray and beaming at him with the face of a cheerful child.

"Mary Anne's supper, Riggs," he said. "I have a heart, if no one else has one."

But as he moved carefully toward the door with his tray, he was aware that something had happened to the man. He looked relieved. He even favored Andy with a faint but benevolent smile.

"I'll carry it up, sir."

"No, you don't, Riggs. This is my tray and I'm sticking to it."

He was still wondering as he climbed the stairs. The door into Mrs. Livingstone's room was still closed, and across the hall the doctor was about to depart, booming cheer and hope to the weary young man behind him. "Give them time, man; give them time. It's only five hours or so. He's all right, depend on it."

He closed the door, and in the sudden silence Andy saw that he looked tired and rather deflated, as though he had given out more than he had to give. His voice no longer boomed as they met.

"Bad business, this," he said.

"It is, doctor."

"Any news?"

"Not so far. At least," he added truthfully, "I haven't heard any."

The doctor nodded and went on down, and Andy had a quick feeling of pity for him. He was an actor with a difficult part. All doctors were actors.

He did not move until he had heard the front door slam. He was still puzzled. There was nothing here to account for the change in Riggs. Maybe he had imagined it. He turned and carried his tray up to the third floor.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

### IV

Mary Anne was looking slightly better. Nevertheless, her face puckered when she saw him.

"Tell me, Mr. Andrews, am I under arrest?"

"Bless my soul, no. Whatever put that into your head?"

He put the tray on a chair beside the bed. "You've just got notions," he told her. "Lying here alone is what does it. Nobody's been up, I suppose, since I left?"

"Nobody but Mr. Riggs."

"Oh, he came?"

"Not to see me." The grievance revived in her face. "I thought it was the tea and toast, so I opened the door a little. But it was only Riggs with a suitcase."

"A suitcase?"

"Yes, sir. He just put it in the trunk room and went away."

He blinked behind his glasses. A suitcase! Well, after all, why not? He supposed a butler's duty might comprise carrying a suitcase to a trunk room without undue suspicion. Besides, hadn't Livingstone spent the previous night at his club?

"You didn't notice whose suitcase it was, I suppose?"

She looked doubtful.

"Hers, I think. It was black, and Mr. Livingstone's is yellow."

So that was it! That was why Riggs was relieved. That was what lay behind the nurse's anger. He cursed himself for a fool, standing alone later in the dark upper hall. His case, if he had ever had one, had blown up in his face; a family row, nothing more or less, with the wife packing to leave and maybe Reno in the offing.

"You're the hell of a detective," he told himself with disgust, and felt suddenly as deflated as the doctor had looked. "Digging around backstairs for hours, and then turning up a squabble!" He could see the chief if he knew; hear Jenkins' ironic laughter. Jenkins had held out all along for a professional job. Well, maybe it was. But was it?

He ran again over the story as he knew it, and some of his old confidence returned. Someone in the house knew something.



## THE INSIDE STORY

There were still too many coincidences. He resumed his silent whistling and, wandering back along the hall to the trunk room, went in and turned on the light. The suitcase was there, just inside the door, and it was black, as Mary Anne had said.

He closed the door and inspected it. It was unlocked and empty, and he stood staring at it for some time. Suppose she had meant to go and to take the boy with her? That was possible, certainly, but why stage a kidnaping to do it? Why not simply have taken him? Nevertheless, he had to know, and turning abruptly, he switched off the light and went down the stairs to the second floor.

His face was grim as he knocked at the door of Mrs. Livingstone's room, and still grim when the nurse opened it.

"I want to see Mrs. Livingstone," he said. And he added: "Alone, if you please."

The nurse stared at him. This was not the cheerful young man of an hour or so ago. He looked determined and severe, and her protest died on her lips. But she looked back over her shoulder.

"It's a detective," she said. "He wants to see you."

"All right. Let him come in," said a tired young voice; and Andy entered, closing the nurse out with considerable firmness. Then he faced the bed, and some of his new-found confidence suddenly deserted him. In her bed the girl looked young and desperately tragic. Very lovely, too, but crushed and defeated. His voice softened.

"I wanted to ask a question or two, if you don't mind."

"There's no news, then?"

"Not yet. It's rather soon." He blinked at her through his spectacles. She looked like a child herself, he thought; and that, added to his knowledge that he had no business there, made him uncomfortable. But he pulled himself together.

"You see, Mrs. Livingstone," he said in a fair imitation of the chief's voice, "what we have to do is to get at this thing from the bottom, to—well, to clear the air, if you know what I mean."

She merely looked at him. It was as though her mind was

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

busy somewhere else, and he a thin and unimportant shadow.

"Now, about that suitcase of yours," he went on briskly. "If you'll tell me a little about it, for instance—" His voice broke off, for he saw suddenly that she was trembling.

"What about my suitcase?"

"That's what I'm asking you, Mrs. Livingstone. Isn't it true that you contemplated leaving the house today and going—well, somewhere else?"

She closed her eyes and drew a long breath.

"What has that to do with Larry?" she asked faintly.

"Well, I'll say it like this: Did you or did you not intend to take him with you?"

"No," she said, in a flat voice. "I've been a rotten mother. Ask my husband. Ask Miss Murray. But if you think I stole Larry—well, look at me!"

"But you did intend to go?"

"I did. That hasn't anything to do with what has happened. That is a family matter. My husband thinks I am both a bad mother and a bad wife, if you care to know. Probably he's right. But I didn't plan to take Larry, and if I had I needn't have stolen him." She moved restlessly. "If you want to know any more, ask him."

"Ask him what?"

"I don't know. Ask him if he took Larry." And when he said nothing, she sat up in bed and looked at him wildly. "I suppose I am going crazy," she said, "but I keep wondering if he did. He may have known I was leaving and tried to scare me. But he isn't like that. He'd have let me go. He doesn't care enough. Not any more." And she added, as if to herself: "What a fool I've been! What a fool!" She lay back again, exhausted. "Just forget I said that," she told him. "He hates me, but he would never have done a thing like this. Not to Larry."

Andy was blinking wildly through his glasses. It was all wrong somewhere. She shouldn't be alone here, eating her heart out. Maybe she had been foolish, but it was no crime to be young and gay. She didn't even drink, somebody had said. Well, that

## THE INSIDE STORY

was one up for her anyhow; and she looked, as she lay there, just a little like his sister.

Suddenly and to his utter consternation he found himself bending over the bed and giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"Listen," he said. "You get both those ideas out of your head. He didn't take the boy, and he doesn't hate you. I'm betting all I've got on that." And he felt quite incredibly elated when she rewarded him with a faint smile.

Outside in the hall again, however, his cheerfulness faded. It was one thing to move around backstairs, as it were; it was another to approach the principals. Like a freshman slapping a senior on the back, he thought uncomfortably, going back to his college days. The chief would certainly give him hell if he knew. And he had got precisely nowhere.

His disquiet was not removed by the sudden opening of the sitting-room door and young Livingstone's appearance in it. He was disheveled and pale, and he gave a glance at his wife's door before he saw Andy. Then he stiffened.

"Anything new?"

"Nothing yet. Sorry. It ought to be coming along pretty soon." And when Livingstone showed signs of retreating into the room again: "I'd like a few words with you, if you don't mind."

"Words! That's all I've had so far. Don't you fellows do anything in a case like this but sit around and wear out the seats of your pants?"

Andy, who had hardly sat down for the past three hours, smiled rather ruefully as he followed him in. "There's plenty doing," he said. "It's outside, of course."

"And I'm to sit here and wait for that telephone while Lord knows what's happening!"

"Well, they'll want to talk to you, you see."

"They?" Young Livingstone stared at him. "So you think it's an outside job, too, do you?"

"Don't you?"

"I'm damned if I know." He ran his hand through his heavy hair. "Somebody knew a lot, that's certain."

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

He lapsed into silence, and Andy lighted a cigarette. When he spoke again, it was in a milder voice. The fellows downstairs, as he called them, wanted to issue a general broadcast at eleven o'clock. He wanted that, too, but he was worried about his mother.

"She listens in at night," he said, "and she's not young and she has a bad heart. So far, we haven't told her. I haven't dared to."

But Andy was hardly listening. He was making an important decision.

"I ought to tell you," he said, blinking nervously through his glasses, "that I'm not definitely connected with the case. I brought the others over, and that's about all. But I've been looking around a bit and—well, it doesn't look like a professional job to me."

Livingstone looked up quickly.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"Well, look at it. Whoever it was took a lot of chances, that's sure. Offhand you might say that he took too many. How was he to know that the boy would go to him? Or that the girl would cross the street ahead, as he told her to? Or that she wouldn't turn and look back until she got across? What I mean is, no professional would take all those chances at once. One, maybe, not three or four."

Rather surprisingly, young Livingstone seemed to brace himself. "All right," he said roughly. "Come out with it. Who took him, and why?"

"That's going pretty fast, isn't it? D'you mind if I sit down? I've climbed so many stairs I feel like a mountain goat. Well, take it like this. The boy's shy, so the chances are he knew who picked him up. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure he did. Then what? Remember, if the girl turns around and sees this fellow making off, there will be the devil to pay. But suppose there is a car right there, and this man doesn't cross. He shows the child to somebody in the car. That's innocent enough, isn't it? Even if the girl howls and there's an officer on hand, the thing ceases to be a kidnaping. 'Is that the Livingstones' little boy? Do let me see him.' Get it? But the girl hasn't turned, so he simply hands

## THE INSIDE STORY

the boy in and gets in himself, and goes away. I'll bet you that by tomorrow we'll find half a dozen people who saw something just like that."

"And who was in the car?"

"No professional crook, depend on it. Somebody who can qualify, in case of an alarm by the girl; can say that they asked to see the child. Very likely someone who knew the child. It has its cheerful side at that, you know," Andy went on. "It simplifies the thing, you see. After all, how many men did the boy know? Not so many, probably. And who was in the car? That's what it comes down to. I—you understand, of course, that this is only my own idea. The chief doesn't know it, and he probably wouldn't agree if he did."

There was a brief silence. Livingstone still stood, leaning on a table and thinking intently. All at once he flushed and straightened.

"Look here," he said. "You don't think this was a kidnaping for ransom at all, do you?"

"I haven't said that. I'm trying to find out."

"Then what do you think? That I am guilty? Or my wife?"

"Well," said Andy reasonably, "each of you apparently suspects the other. I suppose you can't both be guilty!"

"Are you telling me," said Livingstone incredulously, "that she thinks I took Larry?"

"Something like that; that she's been all wrong about a lot of things, and that you don't care for her any more. You know the sort of thing. Of course, she's pretty nervous, alone and all—"

But he received no reply. Livingstone had shot across the hall and into his wife's room, and Andy smiled to himself.

He sat there for some time, resting his aching feet and keeping an eye on the staircase; for he had no intention of letting Jenkins or the chief find him there. But although his story had blown up and he had no idea of where to turn next, the song he silently whistled was a cheerful one.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

v

Some time later he made his way to the pantry again. It had suddenly occurred to him that he had had no dinner, and he was carefully inspecting an open refrigerator when Riggs entered. Andy looked up with a grin.

"Been carrying another suitcase, Riggs?"

Riggs looked blank. "I don't understand, sir."

Andy smiled cheerfully. "Never mind," he said. "Hold the fort, as I said before. What's that?"

For the butler had produced a small piece of paper and was holding it out.

"The doctor left a prescription for Mrs. Livingstone. Will it be all right for me to go to the drug store and have it filled?"

"Probably, but you'll have to get an O. K. from the library first."

But he had lost all interest in food for the moment. He closed the refrigerator door and, while Riggs changed his coat, made his way rather uneasily forward to the library, shutting the door behind him. The men looked up in surprise as he entered.

"I thought you were home and in bed hours ago, Andy," Jenkins said.

"I've just been hanging around in case I was needed."

"Needed is good!" said Jenkins. But Andy gave him no time for more. He addressed the chief smoking his old pipe behind the desk, the telephone in front of him.

"The butler wants to take a prescription to the drug store," he said. "Probably all right, but I might keep an eye on him. He'll be here for an O. K."

The chief, looking tired and anxious, nodded absently.

"All right, Andy," he said. "But he's probably all right. Been in the family for thirty years."

Jenkins was grinning when Andy turned and went out, but he did not notice it. The chief's permission had given him his first status on the case, and he was warmed and glowing with recognition. Actually he expected nothing from tailing Riggs to the corner drug store; nor did anything happen at first. It was only

## THE INSIDE STORY

after the prescription had been handed in that Andy across the street saw the butler give a quick look around and then move quickly into the telephone booth and close the door.

He bolted across the street and in by a side door. Luckily the shop was empty and the clerk had retired behind the partition, but Andy, edging close to the booth, could hear only the butler's voice, low and cautious, and after a moment he flung open the door and put a hand on Riggs' suddenly rigid arm. He was not quick enough, however. With his left hand Riggs had hung up the receiver, and Andy's frenzied attempts to locate the call resulted only in the usual "Number, please."

The butler had made no move, and finally he turned to him.

"All right, Riggs," he said cheerfully. "Get your little bottle and let's go. You can talk when we get back to the house. That's all they've got to do there—listen."

But Riggs managed to retain his dignity. He even smiled, although he was pale.

"It is all very simple, sir," he said. "You can discover, if you like, who I called. As soon as we learned this afternoon that Master Larry was gone, I telephoned to Barnes, old Mrs. Livingstone's chauffeur, and told him to warn the household. The old lady isn't very well, and the idea was to keep the news from her, and reporters out of the house. Then tonight, when I learned that there was to be a radio broadcast at eleven—"

"How did you learn that?"

"I understood it to be the case," said Riggs impassively. "And as we were forbidden to use the house telephone, I called Barnes at Rosedale to cut the aerial out there, or whatever was necessary. There is no crime in that. You can verify it by Barnes himself, if you like. Call the garage. He lives over it."

And that, as was developed a few minutes later in the library again, was that. Andy, waiting nervously while the call was made, was sure that it would be. Barnes himself answered the telephone. Yes, Riggs had called him. . . . Yes, he knew the boy was gone. Very sorry too. Terrible for the old lady if she heard it. . . . Yes, sir, that was why Riggs had called. He had cut the

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

aerial on the roof, but he wasn't sure that it would do any good. . . . No, no reporters so far.

Through it all, Riggs had stood, pale but impassive. All the faces in the room had been turned toward him, intent and suspicious. He was ringed in by suspicion. Four men, all tense, all ready to leap if he made a move, but only when it was over did he move at all. Then he shrugged slightly.

"If that's all, gentlemen—"

But Andy watched him as he went out, and he saw that beads of fine sweat had sprung out on his forehead. They looked as though they had developed spontaneously with the end of his ordeal, out of sheer relief. Men did that, he knew; held out through torment, dry and burning, and then sweated with relief. Inside the room the tension had been broken, however. They looked at Andy with a sort of amusement.

"Full of tips as a package of cigarettes, Andy, aren't you?"

He grinned back.

"I'm a detective, not a clairvoyant."

"A detective! Who says so?"

But he stood his ground, although he himself was moist with anxiety.

"It's like this, chief," he said: "What's the matter with this Barnes making the snatch? If the boy knew who picked him up—"

"Who says so?"

"Well, it sort of looks like it, doesn't it? And he'd know Barnes, while Mary Anne wouldn't. She's only been here a week."

The chief listened to him patiently. His eyes were red with the smoke which filled the room, and before him was an empty coffee cup and a pad on which he had done considerable aimless scribbling. He watched Andy with a sort of benevolent indulgence.

"Not bad, Andy," he said. "But we've covered that already. Barnes had the old lady out for a drive in the country all afternoon. Didn't get in until five."



## THE INSIDE STORY

So that also was that. Andy turned and went out into the hall, and after a moment's thought, climbed the stairs again. Something stubborn in him refused to acknowledge defeat, was still convinced that the story lay inside the house. But where? The nurse? He did not believe it. And yet—women had been known to steal children—especially childless women.

He thought about her, pausing on the stairs to do so. After all, she was unaccounted for that afternoon. Livingstone had been at his office, his wife in the house. Even Riggs had not been out for any purpose. And according to his theory, whoever had been in the abducting car must have known the boy; must have been there with some semblance of legitimacy.

Nevertheless, he weakened somewhat when he saw her in the hall on the second floor, sitting alone on a stiff chair.

She had taken off her cap, and with it had gone some of her austerity. She looked elderly and lonely and rather pitiful, but he had no time to consider that.

"Listen, Miss Murray," he said. "I want you to go over this day bit by bit. What did you do? Where did you go? Who knew you were out, or saw you while you were out?"

"Not more than five thousand people," she said scornfully. "How many recognized me is different." She picked up her cap again and set it defiantly on her head, anchoring it there with pins and keeping her eyes on him. "What are you getting at, anyhow? Asking me for an alibi?"

"Not at all," he said hastily. "I just want the facts. You didn't use the car, I suppose?"

"They drive their own car. If you want any more facts, the old lady wanted some knitting wool. Riggs got the message and brought it up to Mrs. Livingstone; but she wasn't thinking about wool just then. She sent me, and if you don't believe that, ask her. She's got the stuff in there now."

He stood very still, blinking. He had not expected much, but he had run up another blind alley. But was it a blind alley? There was something there; he was just missing it, but it was there. It was just around the corner of his mind.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Tell me something," he said suddenly. "Did Riggs know that Mrs. Livingstone was planning to go away today?"

She looked startled. "I suppose he did. He had carried down her suitcase."

He was blinking wildly now. "He wouldn't want that to happen, I suppose. He's still devoted to the old lady, and it would be a blow to her. That's true, isn't it?"

"If you think Riggs did it, you are an idiot," she said contemptuously. "He never left the house all day. As for her going, she's not going now. If you don't believe me, go in there and look." She indicated the bedroom door. "It takes trouble to bring some people to their senses."

But Andy was not listening. He was standing still, noiselessly whistling and staring at the closed door. Suddenly he leaned down and put a hand on her rigid arm.

"Listen to me," he said. "I've got a hunch this thing's about to break wide open. Just a hunch, but I get 'em now and then. So you cheer up."

Down in the lower hall again, he picked up his hat and made his way to the door into the yard. Murphy moved out from the shadow, recognized him and fell back again.

"Everything quiet, Murphy?"

"Nobody's tried to leave. The butler's been out on the steps once or twice, but he just smoked a cigarette and went in again."

"Keeping an eye on you, eh?"

"Looks like it," said Murphy, grinning.

He went on, looking right and left along the alley before he left the gate. It was still and empty, however, and he got into his car and took out his road map. About ten miles, he figured; say twenty minutes if the road patrols didn't hold him too long. Every road, of course, was being patrolled.

As he started his engine he found that his hands were sweating, and smiled to himself as he wiped them dry. Hell of a detective, he was!

Then he stepped on the gas and shot through the town as though he had been fired out of a gun.

## THE INSIDE STORY

### VI

The trip took more time, however, than he had expected. The road seemed lined with uniformed men in cars, on motorcycles and afoot. A waving lantern would stop him; he would slide to a stop, and from some place of concealment he would be surrounded by a half dozen officers, their faces grim and determined. The doors of his car would be jerked open and he would be conscious of the light on dark-blue automatics.

He began to be nervous. "Listen, boys. Can't you telephone ahead and clear the road for me? I'm in the hell of a hurry."

"What's the matter, Andy? Got a dead line to beat?"

"Something like it."

Once a car loaded with reporters picked him up and followed him, but he got the troopers to hold it at the next stop. However, he saw with relief, as he turned into the drive of the Livingstone house, that it was only half-past ten. He had still a half hour until that eleven-o'clock broadcast. To his surprise, he found that he was sweating profusely.

He did not go to the house. Instead he left his car in the shadow of some trees, and five minutes later he had skirted the house and was close to the garage. Like the house, it was dark, but there was a young moon, and by its light he saw that the doors were wide open and that a man was sitting inside, smoking a pipe. As Andy watched he knocked out its ashes onto the floor, and rising, yawned heavily. Then he struck a match to consult his watch, and Andy stepped forward.

"That you, Barnes?"

The man whirled, then stiffened.

"Who is it?"

"It's all right. I didn't want you pulling a gun on me, that's all. You are Barnes, I suppose?"

"That's my name. And who are you?"

The tone was definitely hostile, and Andy smiled as the lights went on over his head.

"It's all right, Barnes," he said. "After Riggs called you, it

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

seemed a good idea to see you, that's all. Nice car you've got there. Just cleaned it, haven't you?"

"Always clean it after we come in, sir. Mrs. Livingstone's orders."

Andy opened the door and glanced inside. "Nice and clean, outside and inside," he said casually. Then he turned suddenly and confronted the chauffeur. "Now see here, Barnes," he said, "I want to know what you know about what happened this afternoon. You know something, and I know you know it. Now, what is it?" And when Barnes said nothing: "What is it that Riggs and you cooked up together when he called you up this morning?"

"Nothing. He didn't call me."

"You are willing to swear to that?"

"On a stack of Bibles."

"You haven't got the boy here?"

"Go up and look, if you like."

Andy stood stock-still, staring at him. He looked solid, middle-aged and respectable. More than that, he looked calm, almost judicial.

"And this afternoon? What about that?"

"I've told you fellows that already. I took Mrs. Livingstone out for a drive."

"Into the city?"

"What business is it of yours where I went? If you think I'd hurt a hair of that child's head—"

But suddenly Andy had had an electrifying, a shocking idea. It began in his head and worked its way all over him. It was so violent that it almost shook him. He gazed at Barnes with his half-whimsical smile; then he did a surprising thing. He reached out solemnly and shook the chauffeur's unresisting hand.

"Had a pretty hard day of it, Barnes, haven't you?" he said. "Always a bad thing to tamper with the law, Barnes. Or to underestimate the police. Now, if Riggs hadn't telephoned tonight, you'd have been all right."

"Yes, sir," said Barnes tonelessly. "I told him he was a fool."

## THE INSIDE STORY

"And now," said Andy, "I'd better see the old lady herself. She'll need a bit of cheering, I imagine."

He whistled soundlessly but gaily on his way to the house. He knew now, knew the story from start to finish. It had always been there, only he hadn't seen it. Mingled with this was an enormous sense of relief that the boy was safe—safe and warm and fed. "I've been scared," he thought to himself. "Scared for the kid." But in the back of his mind was the chief, red-eyed and waiting. He would have something to tell the chief.

Nevertheless, he was slightly uneasy as he entered the house. It was a big house, filled with dignity and fastidious living, and when Barnes at last rapped and then threw open a door on the lower hall, he had to stop and wipe his hands again. Then, blinking furiously, he stepped inside and confronted a little elderly lady, knitting by a fire.

She glanced up quickly, surveying them both with a certain amusement.

"Good gracious, Barnes!" she said. "What is the matter now?"

"There's a gentleman here to see you, from the police," said Barnes.

"From the police? How interesting! What in the world have you been doing, Barnes?"

Andy came forward, still blinking, while her bright birdlike eyes darted over him.

"You don't look at all like a policeman," she announced. "Now tell me about it. What have we done, out here in the country? And do sit down. It's such a long time since I have talked with a policeman."

Barnes had gone out and closed the door. All at once Andy felt dubious and uneasy. She had a bad heart, they said, and he was here without authority. What if she fell over, or whatever it was that people did when they had hearts?

But she gave no indication at the moment of being anything but interested.

"Well?" she said. "And what have we done?"

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

He sat forward in his chair, looking young and rather absurd, but frightfully earnest.

"Would it mean anything to you, Mrs. Livingstone," he said carefully, "if I told you that everything is all right in town? I mean—well, that your son and his wife are on good terms again?"

She had picked up her knitting again, but now she stopped and looked up.

"Dear me!" she said. "How much you know of our family affairs! I had no idea the police knew so much." And then: "Yes," she said softly. "It would mean a great deal to me, of course. They are such children, you know; playing with life now, but really caring very much for each other."

"And you could understand, I suppose," said Andy, still carefully, "that an interested person might go to considerable lengths to keep them together?"

She eyed him.

"Do you know," she said, "that this is really quite a remarkable talk? Are you trying to tell me that some member of my family is in trouble with the police, after all these years? And what have my son and his wife to do with it?"

But he refused to be put off.

"I'll say it another way," he said, blinking earnestly through his glasses. "Would an interested person, in such a case, feel justified in doing something rather drastic in order to bring them together. Do you think he would?"

"What an odd question!" she said, glancing at him again with her bright eyes. "So psychological! Well, I can only say that in my time we didn't take our marriages for granted. We tried everything we could, legitimate and illegitimate. I remember once that I thought my husband was drinking too much and I got some pills from the doctor. I gave them to him in his coffee one night, and I didn't sleep a wink; but he never even sneezed."

"In other words," he said, "when everything else fails, you believe in direct action. Is that it? In the pill in the coffee, and so on?"

## THE INSIDE STORY

"I believe in action. Certainly."

Then at last he smiled.

"I wish you'd tell me about it," he said. "It's costing the state about a million dollars a minute just now, and likely as not, they've arrested a good many innocent people already."

Suddenly he saw that her hands were shaking. For an instant the mask was down, and he saw her for what she was—a tired little elderly woman who had done a desperate and heroic thing in defiance of the law. But she was calm again almost at once.

"It was all very simple," she said quietly. "And something had to be done. They have been drifting apart, and she's a good girl. She'll make a good mother eventually. But they were young and impatient. They wouldn't build; and today, when Riggs telephoned me that she was going to Reno, I—well, I decided to do it."

"And he is here?"

"He is upstairs, sound asleep, after a perfectly proper supper of cereal and stewed fruit." He saw with relief that her color was coming back, and her humor. She was smiling. "Even Miss Murray would approve of that supper," she said.

He looked at the clock. It was fifteen minutes to eleven, and he wanted to shut off the broadcast as soon as possible. No use getting the public excited. The thing was over. But he was still curious.

"I suppose it was Barnes who picked up the boy?"

"Yes. I was waiting in the car. You see, I knew Miss Murray was out. As a matter of fact, I had asked my son's wife to send her on an errand for me. And Mary Anne had never seen Barnes. It might work or it might not, but I had to try."

"I suppose that Riggs knew all along?"

"Oh, yes, Riggs knew." She smiled faintly. "He knew, but he didn't approve. He very often doesn't approve of me. Just now he is worrying about getting the boy back. Without involving me," she added. "That's important, you see. The children must never know. Now that you are here, of course—"

Andy got up and looked down at her small and valiant figure.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF TODAY

"Now that I am here," he said, smiling, "I'm to get him back. Is that it?"

"That has been the idea, more or less, ever since you entered that door."

He had a swift vision of those patrolled roads, of the vast machinery she had so simply set in operation, but he only said casually: "Well, I suppose Barnes and I can manage it somehow. And now, if you will get him—"

He watched her out of the room rather ruefully. He could see the chief's face when he told him, the necessity of keeping the story out of the press; a dozen anxieties sat heavy on him. But he would not let her down.

"All right, Barnes," he called. "Come in. You and I have a job to do, and heaven help us. Now, where's the telephone?"

### VII

At half-past eleven that night a shabby car came to a stop in the alley behind the house, and a young man with horn-rimmed spectacles and carrying something wrapped in blankets made his way through the gate and confronted the man on watch there.

"Got him, Murphy," he said in a low voice. "Go ahead and open the door."

"My God, Andy!" said Murphy fervently. "What happened to him?"

"Case of direct action," said Andy cheerfully, and left Murphy, looking confounded, staring after him.

It was a half hour later when, behind closed doors and in a library filled with smoke, Andy faced the chief and the others with a determined glint in his eyes.

"Our story's this," he said, "and I for one am going to stick to it. The kidnapers got frightened and dumped the boy in the grandmother's drive. I'd been out to break the news to her, and found the child where he'd been left, rolled in a blanket and still asleep."

One of the men groaned.



## THE INSIDE STORY

"Why bring in a blanket?" he asked. "We'll be tracing the thing for the next six months."

"All right," Andy agreed. "Not rolled in a blanket, then. But that story has to go, chief; not only for the outside but for this house too."

This was a new Andy, self-confident and stubborn. For the first time they had to recognize him for what he had done, and if there was resentment in their faces, there was respect also.

"Certainly did get a break, Andy."

"Sure. Might have been a fracture."

"What started you off, anyhow?"

"Well," he said modestly, "it was just a bit here and there. Up to the time I got out to the house I thought it was Riggs and Barnes, and I thought I knew why. But after I got there—"

"Yeah? Barnes told you, did he?"

"No. It just struck me all of a heap. The old lady had to have been in that car."

Suddenly he was very tired. He had sat down very little for a number of hours, and his whole body ached. He yawned, and found the chief's eyes on him, kindly and faintly amused.

"Better go home and get to bed," he said. "It was a good job, Andy. Pity the press can't have it, but the commissioner can. However," he added, "it wouldn't hurt the next time to take me into your confidence. I've been known to have an idea or two of my own."

In the hall as they left, Andy saw the nurse, radiant with happiness, coming along from the pantry with a glass of milk. He tried to catch her eye, but she did not even see him. Well, that was a policeman's job, he thought, and strutting slightly, went back to the alley and crawled into his old car.

But before he left he took a final survey of the house, now lighted and alive again. He sat there for some little time, soundlessly whistling. Then he stepped on the starter and, after his usual fashion, shot toward home as though he was going to a fire.